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Posted on Wed, Sep. 3, 2008

Palin gives boost, but questions, too

The governor, who speaks tonight, has fired up the GOP base, but McCain aims for wider appeal.

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ST. PAUL, Minn. - Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin's life offers a smorgasbord of strategic political demographics:

An NRA member, she hunts moose (and eats the meat). She's a working "hockey mom." She married her high-school sweetheart, a blue-collar guy. She's an antiabortion evangelical Christian. As a bonus, she has tangled with the leaders of her state Republican Party over corruption.

In picking Palin for his running mate, Sen. John McCain was betting that her story would attract two sometimes-overlapping groups crucial to success in November: disaffected women who backed Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton in the Democratic primaries, and working-class white voters in swing states such as Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Tonight, Palin is scheduled to accept the vice presidential nomination at the Republican National Convention here, five days after McCain stunned the political world by choosing her over better-known figures. Her first prime-time televised speech also comes after revelations that have raised questions about her biography and political philosophy.

"Most VPs don't deliver even their own states, where Palin delivers a demographic that might help win several important states," said Andrew Richner, a Michigan alternate delegate from the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe. "She can bring in the Reagan Democrats."

Analysts say Palin has seemed to energize the conservative base of the GOP and has the potential to appeal to women and working-class voters. Still, there are not much data from polls yet to test the proposition.

Palin is little-known and it's early.

More than 70 percent of 898 registered voters surveyed Friday, the day she was picked, had never heard of Palin or did not have enough information to form an opinion about her, according to a USA Today/Gallup Poll.

The survey said that 39 percent of respondents believed the Alaska governor was qualified to be president, compared with 57 percent who said the same of Delaware Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr., Democratic Sen. Barack Obama's running mate. The poll's margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

A CBS News survey of 875 adults released yesterday found that opinions about both vice presidential candidates were fluid. While 37 percent of those interviewed had a favorable opinion

of Biden, 47 percent said they did not know enough to say. Palin was viewed favorably by 22 percent, and two-thirds said they did not know enough to have an opinion. The telephone survey was conducted Friday through Sunday.

"She could turn out to be a brilliant pick or a disaster," political analyst Stuart Rothenberg said.

In recent days, news reports have brought a steady stream of less-flattering pictures of Palin. State lawmakers are investigating her after she allegedly fired the head of the state police because he would not remove a trooper embroiled in a nasty divorce with Palin's sister. She has made sympathetic statements about the Alaskan Independence Party, which advocates secession from the union and the return of all federal land to state residents.

Most prominently, the Palins announced that their daughter Bristol, 17, is five months pregnant. The family said Bristol would have the baby and wed the father, Levi Johnston, 18, who was traveling from Alaska to join them at the convention.

Privately, some Republicans have worried about what else might be out there, and the PR surprises have raised a question about how thoroughly McCain investigated Palin and how considered his decision-making was.

"The vetting process was completely thorough and I'm grateful for the results," McCain said at a campaign stop in Northeast Philadelphia yesterday.

In St. Paul, campaign manager Rick Davis said he did not expect more controversy, predicting Palin would weather the storm.

"It's blowing through right now," Davis said in an interview. "It's half of what it was yesterday and tomorrow it will be half of what it is right now. And when it was churning around, it was all b.s."

Palin cemented her standing as a hero to social conservatives when she gave birth in April to a son with Down syndrome, Trig. She refused to consider an abortion, she later said, after tests revealed the condition.

"To me, this is a teachable moment," said former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum, long a leader among social conservatives. "We all make mistakes. The question is not whether you make mistakes. It's what you do when you make them."

Santorum said he thought Palin had reacted to the situation of her daughter's pregnancy by doing "the best for all three of the people involved" - meaning her daughter, the boyfriend and the unborn child. "We love her more because of what she did, not less," he said.

Conversations with Pennsylvania Republicans gathered for the convention found a brewing backlash against the media coverage of the pregnancy.

"It turns her into a more sympathetic figure," said Mike Puppio, a delegate from Delaware County. "I just don't see it as relevant. How did this become my business?"

Most of those interviewed said they believed Palin would be an electoral asset.

"There's a tremendous amount of excitement about her, and I think she helps the ticket in northwestern Pennsylvania," said Ash Khare, a delegate from Warren, Pa. "That NRA connection cuts across the parties."

Said Tom Ellis, the GOP candidate for Pennsylvania treasurer, "She's a rock star . . . because she's the strong woman we're teaching our daughters to be."

From the moment of her unveiling at a rally Friday, Palin has made appeals to female voters, praising Clinton for her pioneering campaign and saying she wanted to "shatter" the glass ceiling in politics.

Traditionally Democratic feminist groups have said most women will not favor Palin when they learn about her staunch antiabortion stance - she favors a ban on abortion virtually without exception. They also said voters would see her as a doctrinaire Republican on economic issues.

It will be difficult for the McCain-Palin ticket to break the gender gap, one of the most persistent features of modern politics, said Debbie Walsh, director for the Study of Women in American Politics at Rutgers University.

"What John McCain did was take a risk to go after that vote," Walsh said, "but what we know about the women's vote is that it generally favors Democrats. In the past, we've seen moderate pro-choice Republican women running against a Democratic man, and the man still benefits." She said research showed that the gender gap, first identified in 1980, existed because Democrats had cemented an image as protectors of the social safety net.

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