

Scrutiny of Palin poses risks for GOP and Dems

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(09-03) 04:00 PDT Washington - -- Republican presidential candidate John McCain might have shaken up his campaign beyond his own control when he selected a running mate who in just four days was swept from obscurity to the equivalent of a national dinner conversation about the choices of working mothers.

As only the second woman ever to appear on a major party's presidential ticket, arriving after accusations that Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton had suffered sexist attacks in her quest for the Democratic nomination, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin is a minefield for McCain and for Democratic nominee Barack Obama.

Governing a state with fewer people than San Francisco, and just two years ago a small-town mayor, Palin has already sucked the air from both parties' nominees and has scrambled the debate between feminists and cultural conservatives.

As the McCain campaign tries to fend off questions surrounding Palin's record, Democrats found her obliterating the buzz around Obama's big acceptance speech in Denver last week. Palin will face more scrutiny after she introduces herself to the nation from the convention stage.

"Both parties are on unfamiliar turf here," said Republican strategist Dan Schnur, who advised McCain during his unsuccessful presidential run in 2000. "Democrats can't risk offending working women, many of whom have faced similar challenges in their lives and with their own families, but Republicans have to be careful that stories about her personal and family life don't obscure aspects of her biography that the McCain campaign wants to emphasize. It's a tricky situation."

McCain campaign co-chair Carly Fiorina on Tuesday denounced as sexist the attacks on Palin's inexperience. Citing everything from Democratic vice presidential nominee Joe Biden's "She's good-looking" joke, intended as a self-deprecating comparison to himself, to Obama national co-chair Tom Daschle's statement that Palin has "absolutely no experience," Fiorina said that after Clinton's campaign, "American women are more highly tuned than ever to recognize and decry sexism in all its forms."

Obama on Monday ruled questions about Palin's family, including her teenage daughter's out-of-wedlock pregnancy, off-limits.

Obama's own mother "gave birth at age 18, so I don't think he wants to go there," said Deborah Rhode, an anti-discrimination legal scholar at Stanford University. "And Republicans have no choice but to kind of embrace this as an affirmation of life: She's keeping the baby, she's going to get married, this is what they want women in these circumstances to do."

It is a remarkable turnabout from 16 years ago, when former Vice President Dan Quayle attacked the popular TV comedy series "Murphy Brown" for portraying "a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly



paid professional woman" who is "mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it 'just another lifestyle choice.' "

Still, Palin's unusual personal history, warts and all, could enhance her voter appeal, especially among women who are just tuning in to the election.

"She's such a complicated persona, she's such a mix of different things, that it's really hard to predict how she will come across to those women," said Susan Carroll, a senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "Clearly a lot of undecided women will be able to identify with a number of things about her life, including her trials and tribulations, around her infant with Down syndrome, and also the pregnant teenager and the son going off to Iraq. A lot of American families have been through these things themselves."

Today, some Democratic women question whether Palin is putting career ahead of family.

"You have women in particular looking at this situation with her daughter and saying, 'How could you put her through this, you knew she was pregnant, you accept this nomination and you know what's coming for her,' " said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics.

Carol Hardy-Fanta, director of the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts, said Palin shows how a woman's personal and professional choices "come under this intense scrutiny, anytime there are any decisions made that are not what some stereotype of what perfect should be. I don't know what a perfect woman candidate would be. Hillary Clinton was strong but was criticized as too shrill or pushy or strident. Now you've got this woman juggling a lot of things, and she's being criticized."

The Obama campaign will have to limit itself strictly to issues, said Maria Elena Durazo, a Los Angeles labor leader working with the Obama campaign. "If anybody says she can't do her job because she has a 6-month-old child, I would say that's sexist," Durazo said. "What I think voters want to hear about is what have you done every single day to help the cause of women. ... I don't think there is any other credible way of dealing with her."

Palin might be hard to attack personally if her popularity in Alaska is any indication. "She is a pretty extraordinary political talent," said Anchorage pollster Ivan Moore. "She projects a very, very likable, natural, honest image. ... People like her primarily because she's a likable person."

Palin hits a public nerve, but which one remains the question.

"I don't think there's been another instance in American politics since the Anita Hill hearings where the personal and the political have become so intertwined for so many people," said Schnur, who now directs the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California. "Long after Sarah Palin becomes either the first female vice president or a footnote to history, this discussion is still going to resonate."

Key events

TODAY

Roll call: Nominations and vote proclaiming John McCain as the GOP's nominee.

Speakers: The schedule of speakers has been in flux. For updated schedule information, go to www.gopconvention2008.com.

THURSDAY

John McCain's acceptance speech.

On tv

- Cable news channels broadcast live all day.
- PBS begins its regular daily coverage at 5 p.m. PDT.
- ABC, CBS and NBC begin regular coverage at 7 p.m. PDT.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/09/03/MNIU12MMIH.DTL>

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