

Did Palin give McCain a boost with women?

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Is John McCain experiencing the benefits of a baby bump – or a surge?

A new poll by The Washington Post and ABC News found the Republican candidate has garnered a large increase in support among white women since announcing Sarah Palin as his running mate, putting him ahead of Democratic rival Barack Obama among that demographic for the first time.

But it's unclear whether voters are simply reacting to the novelty of Ms. Palin's personal story and the historic nature of her selection with a fleeting expression of support or whether her choice as vice-presidential nominee has led women to see Mr. McCain in a new light.

Before the Democratic National Convention in late August, Mr. Obama held an 8 percentage point lead among white women voters – 50 per cent to 42 per cent – but after the Republican convention earlier this month, Mr. McCain was ahead by 12 points among white women, 53 per cent to 41 per cent, the poll found.



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US Republican vice presidential candidate Alaska Governor Sarah Palin speaks at a "McCain Street USA" campaign event in Lebanon, Ohio on Tuesday. (ROBYN BECK/AFP/Getty Images)



"Yes, it's about Sarah Palin, but not just putting her on the ticket," said Susan Carroll, a senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "It's about what the choice of Sarah Palin did for McCain's image. It led women to take a second look at this candidate and this campaign and made it look more palatable."

The Washington Post/ABC News poll found that much of Mr. McCain's increase in polls since the Republican National Convention is largely attributable to a shift in support among white women.

And the move has made the race for the White House a virtual tie, with Mr. Obama at 47-per-cent support of registered voters and McCain at 46 per cent. Several other polls conducted over the weekend have shown a similarly tightening race.

Both sides seem to be making efforts to immediately address the issue of women voters, and their reaction to Ms. Palin's emergence on the campaign scene.

Since winning his party's nomination, Mr. Obama has been doing his best to maintain the support of former Hillary Clinton supporters, angry about her loss in the primaries. And many Democrats are likely concerned about a migration of those woman toward Ms. Palin.

Mr. Obama continued his recent criticism of the Alaska governor, saying yesterday that she represents an extension of the policies and priorities of President George W. Bush. But he also placed new emphasis on the issue of education, promising at a campaign stop to double funding for charter schools, pay teachers based on performance and replace those who aren't up to the job, embracing education proposals normally more popular with Republican candidates.

The Republicans, too, are actively wooing women voters.

This week, Ms. Palin will be interviewed by ABC anchor Charlie Gibson in her home state of Alaska, the first comprehensive media sit-down she has granted since joining the Republican campaign.

During the interview, Ms. Palin will give a tour of her family home and offer a glimpse of her life in the northern state, a focus that party insiders admit is an effort to sell her to women voters.

"I see women right at the forefront of that, but not exclusively," a campaign adviser told Politico.com.

Ms. Carroll believes the McCain campaign is right to capitalize on the bump in support among women and to try to connect specifically with gender issues.

"The Democrats failed to do that and created the opening for this," she said. "And part of that is not choosing Hillary Clinton. Had he chosen her, I think it's pretty clear that Sarah Palin would not be on the ticket."

Women voters are likely drawn to Ms. Palin because of her personal story as a working mother of five, Ms. Carroll added, and are as yet largely unaware of where she stands ideologically.

She does not see this as an unflattering testament to how women vote, but instead as a deserved slap in the face to Mr. Obama.

"This really underscores how Obama needs to talk more effectively to these women," she said. "I don't think he speaks with enough passion about the issues in these women's lives."

But not everyone is convinced that the poll represents anything more than a temporary infatuation with a new political figure.

Kathleen Dolan, a professor of political science at University of Wisconsin, said gender has never been a decisive factor for how women vote.



"This will recede over time," she said. "It's about the splash Sarah Palin has made and is probably the high-water mark for her popularity."

Earlier this year, Ms. Dolan released a study of the election data from 1990 to 2004 that found gender affinity has little impact on women's voting patterns.

"There's always this assumption that women support women, and there's relatively little data to support that," she said. "It's party identification that dramatically shapes things, just like when two men are running."

Right now, women as a group might be energized by a woman VP on the ticket, she said. But overall, women in the United States identify more closely with the Democratic party than the Republican Party, their loyalty fuelled by issues of abortion, education and health care.

"Over time, they're going to learn what she's like, what she stands for," Ms. Dolan said of Ms. Palin. "And then, as Democratic women learn more about her, they will run screaming into the night."

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