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## 'Motorcycle mamas' no sure thing for 'mama grizzly' Palin

Erika Bolstad | McClatchy Newspapers

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WASHINGTON — Motorcycle mamas, it turns out, aren't a sure vote for mama grizzlies — if those mama grizzlies are even running for president.

Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin roared into Washington Sunday on the back of a Harley Davidson motorcycle, to a considerable amount of skepticism from the 2012 voters everyone wants on their side: independent women.

Palin hasn't said whether she's running for president. But she used the annual Rolling Thunder motorcycle rally for veterans to kick start a multi-state bus tour that will wend its way up the East Coast to New Hampshire, the site of the nation's first presidential primary.

Voters such as sisters Nancy McGilton, 50, and Kathy Boivin, 55, had their doubts Sunday about the woman who shot to fame after Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., picked her as his vice presidential running mate.

Taking turns posing for pictures at the rally in McGilton's black leather motorcycle vest, the sisters said that about all they had in common with Palin was their mutual support for those serving in the military.

"I'm not a big fan of hers," said McGilton, of Springfield, Va.

Both she and her sister are independent voters, and from the suburbs of northern Virginia, a state President Barack Obama turned from red to blue in 2008 and helped propel him to victory.

Also skeptical was Katherine Blauer, 63, of Arlington, Va. As she and her husband watched the bikes roll over the Memorial Bridge from Arlington Cemetery toward the Lincoln Memorial, Blauer, an independent who voted for Obama in 2008, said she'd like to see New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg in the race.

"I think she does a disservice to women," Blauer said of Palin. "She doesn't show the critical thinking you would want in a president. Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin? C'mon."

Women will have an unprecedented role in the 2012 presidential campaign, and not just as candidates. Two women are potentially running for the Republican nomination: Palin and Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., who's expected to make it official next month.

And Democrats, worried about the slide they saw from the 2008 to 2010 elections, when exit polls show that independent women moved away from the party, have vowed to pay attention to women's concerns of women. U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Fla., is Obama's surrogate-in-chief and has vowed that she'll do everything she can to hold on to the advantage Democrats traditionally have among female voters.

They'll be laying the groundwork "for what will be an unprecedented, robust aggressive presidential campaign and the outreach to women," Wasserman Schultz, just appointed to head the Democratic National Committee, said.

"The fieldwork, the mobilization of women, the active involvement of women is going to be unprecedented," she said.

It remains unclear, however, if Palin is even in the race — or whether the bus tour is merely about building her already formidable brand. Recent polls show her at the top of the Republican race, along with former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, and she told Fox News Channel that she had "fire in the belly" for a presidential bid.

She's also set to release "The Undefeated," a flattering documentary by conservative filmmaker Stephen Bannon, next month in Iowa, the site of caucuses that are the nation's first presidential contest.

But until she announced her plans, the organizers of the Rolling Thunder ride were unaware Palin was incorporating the event into her so-called "One Nation" bus tour. The annual motorcycle event was planned long before Palin decided to use it as a launching point for her tour of "historical sites and patriotic events" throughout the Northeast.

Palin, who arrived at the Pentagon on the back of a motorcycle Sunday morning, was accompanied by a police escort. Several thousand motorcyclists had been waiting for the run to begin for several hours; many had been standing by their bikes since before 7 a.m.

Palin was accompanied by her husband, Todd, and her daughters. She plunged into the crowd, where she greeted riders and posed for photos with a succession of burly, tattooed men. She wore a black helmet, a short-sleeved dark shirt and black pants, and she donned a black leather jacket for her ride on the back of another woman's bike during the parade.

The details of Palin's tour remained murky Sunday, the ostensible launch date. Her spokesman, Tim Crawford, said in an email only that "updates will post on website." Those details — including the next stop — did not emerge Sunday. GOP officials in New Hampshire were

unaware of when Palin might be in the state, where voters take seriously their opportunity to vet candidates in person.

The SarahPAC website did, however, showcase a video that featured shots of the tour bus being prepared.

Women especially are going to want to hear about economic issues, said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at New Jersey's Rutgers University.

"Women tend to see themselves as more economically vulnerable than men, they see themselves as needing to take advantage of that social safety net that government provides, and women are more likely to see themselves as needing Medicare at some point in their lives," she said.

This was something Sen. John McCain failed to see when he picked Palin as his vice presidential running mate, Walsh said. Putting a woman on the ticket is not a guarantee of making inroads with female voters, she said.

"The reality is...the gender of the candidate is really not what's at play," she said. "We don't see it falling out where Republican women are picking up women's support because they're women."

If Palin ran, she would likely have the vote of Paula Looney, 50, a Republican from Ashburn, Va. But it's not because Palin is a woman, Looney said. It's because she stands for "the things I believe in."

"It would be great to have a woman president," she said, and then shrugged, throwing her hands in the air. "But...we don't know if she's running."

(Michael Doyle and Lesley Clark contributed to this report.)

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