

MORE OPINIONS

Is Sarah Palin'?

By Paul Croce
SPECIAL TO THE BEACON

"It's the economy, stupid."

That was the mantra of the Democrats in 1992, when Bill Clinton won his first term in office. Today economic issues may once again be lifting a Democrat in the polls. But Democrats really have another secret weapon hidden in an obvious spot: the popularity of Sarah Palin.

There have been many jaw-dropping critiques of John McCain's choice of running mate, and this has been reinforced by the shock and awe of hearing Republican Gen. Colin Powell endorse Barack Obama, in part, because of McCain's poor judgment.

The Palin pick shored up McCain's conservative credentials. And, yet, it is the very popularity of the Alaska governor in Republican circles that could be the undoing of McCain's Straight Talk Express.

For Republicans confident about their own values but perennially defensive about appearing unsophisticated in the cultural marketplace, just cheering a woman made the convention crowd feel instantly a bit more cool. Her folksy convention speech clinched the deal for Republican endorsement of McCain.

What's in this for Democrats? The answer: audience.

Palin appeals to Republicans, especially very conservative Republicans. Democrats can point to the enthusiasm for her within that audience, and then ask the general public: Is this what you want?

When Palin makes mocking comments on taxes, even ridiculing the Democrats for suggesting that paying taxes is patriotic, she gets a rousing response from Republicans eager to practically eliminate government involvement in society.

Guest Commentary

Democrats can calmly point, not just to social programs, but also to funding for the wars and for the \$700 billion (and growing) bailout. If not from taxation, how will the government pay for these expenditures, some very popular with Republicans?

Palin's small-town ways, including her religious affiliations, have been sources of her popularity. Democrats can honor her Pentecostalism, as they also admire McCain's heroic years in captivity, while asking the American people if the strict moral codes and speaking in tongues are in the mainstream?

Obama hit a note for bridging this values divide during the third debate, when he used words with moral or religious resonance that have, until

recently, been monopolized by Republicans. He called for an "ethic of responsibility" in borrowing and lending, and he maintained "sex is sacred."

Without denigrating anyone's religion, including Palin's, these comments suggest Republicans do not corner the market on religion, and even many hockey and soccer moms may have values different from hers.

Playing on the cheers for the other side has an important precedent that could make Democrats cheer. In the summer of 1948, Harry Truman won the nomination of his Democratic Party, but just barely. The party split, with conservatives turning to Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond, and liberals supporting Progressive Henry

Wallace, while Republican Thomas Dewey hoped to reap a victory while Democrats imploded. The smart money was against Truman, but he was able to turn the very divisions to his own favor. He portrayed his opponents as extremists, and etched out a path in the center all the way to victory.

During the debates, McCain claimed Obama did not understand tactics in war planning. But McCain may have been the one with the most severe tactical error, in his choice of Palin.

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