

Calculated Risk With Female Voters Is Suddenly Even Harder to Calculate

By Anne E. Kornblut and Juliet Eilperin
Washington Post Staff Writers
Tuesday, September 2, 2008; A19

In a presidential campaign that has challenged assumptions about female voters and candidates across the spectrum, the announcement yesterday that Alaska Gov. [Sarah Palin's](#) unmarried teenage daughter is five months pregnant added a variable to the multiple factors that will motivate the votes of more than half of the electorate in November.

Will women judge the choices Palin has made, both to keep working after delivering a baby with Down syndrome this year and to accept [Sen. John McCain's](#) offer to join the Republican ticket after learning of her daughter Bristol's pregnancy?

Will women, often the harshest critics of other women, especially in public life, doubt McCain for choosing a running mate whose life is so complex and full? Or will some of the women who believed so fervently in [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) (D-N.Y.) embrace Palin's all-too-human story and back her historic candidacy, despite ideological differences?

"Who knows how this will bounce around politically?" Democratic strategist Jim Jordan said yesterday.

He added: "It's just a lot for voters to absorb, the thought of both the vice president and her daughter with infants in the Naval Observatory."

At the [Republican National Convention](#) in St. Paul, Minn., some evangelical Christians -- Palin's strongest cheerleaders -- said they were not put off by the news, given that Palin's daughter plans to have the baby and marry the father. Cathie Adams, president of the Texas Eagle Forum, said, "This is a family that keeps dealing with challenges, and they keep doing the right thing." Humans are "fallen beings," Adams added.

Jessica Echard, spokeswoman for the Republican National Coalition for Life, said many female voters will be able to relate to a woman whose family is dealing with a teen pregnancy. "Everybody, especially women as well as men, knows people who have been in this situation before. It makes their family real, which is what we've seen from Day One," Echard said. "It will resonate with women voters because they'll say, 'That happened to me. That happened to someone down the street.'"

That was the tack the McCain campaign took yesterday, arguing that the family crisis will help equip Palin to speak to ordinary Americans about issues they care about. "She may be the most qualified expert of any campaign," said McCain spokesman [Tucker Bounds](#), pausing before adding, "on family issues."

Democratic officials and operatives, leery of criticizing the first woman to run on a major-party ticket since [Geraldine Ferraro](#), were even more uncertain about how to approach an opponent whose most intimate family issues had suddenly been exposed, especially after [Sen. Barack Obama](#), the Democratic nominee, demanded that his staff and reporters back away from the Palin family.

Yet some Republicans privately said they were horrified that McCain had put his faith in a little-known governor with so many personal burdens, exposing the party to questions about how well Palin runs her household and how thoroughly she was vetted. Democrats and Republicans alike said they had no idea what the political fallout would be, especially among women, and argued that it could cut both ways for McCain. A backlash was likely, people on both sides said, should Democrats choose to attack Palin on her personal decisions or her family.

Advertisement

How to Avoid Coming Up Short in Retirement

They say retirement can be the best time of your life. And it can be if you have enough money to enjoy it. If you have a \$500,000 portfolio, you should download our new guide "[The 15-Minute Retirement Plan.](#)" It's loaded with useful information that can help you plan for a comfortable, secure retirement. Don't miss it!

[Click here to download your report!](#)

FISHER INVESTMENTS™

All sides agreed on one point: After upending the gender politics of the campaign with his decision to pick Palin, McCain was forging into uncharted territory in his bid for female voters. A whole new set of policy questions might resonate in the vice presidential debate -- about not only abortion, but also abstinence education, the role and responsibilities of working mothers, child care, and health care.

All are questions that would have been raised had Clinton been on the ticket. Having been passed over as Obama's running mate, Clinton is in the awkward position of being potentially best equipped to rally women to the ballot Nov. 4. She is not, however, planning on playing that role.

"She's not running against Sarah Palin, let's be clear," [Ann Lewis](#), a longtime adviser to Clinton, said yesterday. "She is not on the ticket."

Clinton has issued one statement on Palin -- congratulating her and saying her policies would take the country in the wrong direction -- and has no plans to come out swinging against her, other advisers said.

Instead, Clinton intends to campaign for Obama and against McCain, a strategy that her advisers and Obama's said will not run the risk of energizing the Republican base.

"She made clear she will continue to fight for the people and the issues she has fought for all her life," Lewis said.

[Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz](#) (D-Fla.), an outspoken Clinton advocate who is now a vocal Obama supporter, said the pregnancy of Palin's daughter "is not in the least bit relevant." She said that she had been bombarded with criticism from her constituents over the weekend about the governor but that it was directed at her views, not her personal life.

"Let me tell you, I have never seen a more visceral reaction to a vice presidential selection, ever, and it's not just women -- it's men and dads with young kids; that's a lot of my district. It's unsolicited. There are men telling me, 'I am insulted for women.' She would turn the clock back," Wasserman Schultz said.

Hilary Rosen, a Democratic commentator, said the issue is whether Palin would try to impose her personal choices. Rosen said Democrats should "not be cowed" from including Palin's family life in the political discussion.

"I think that, if anything, it makes it clearer that Democrats have to highlight that the issue isn't what Sarah Palin and her daughter choose to do with their own family. It's that they want to make those choices for all women," Rosen said. "And I think Democrats shouldn't shy away from this issue just because it has a personal connection. If anything, I think it makes it all that much more stark."

Eilperin reported from St. Paul, Minn.

Post a Comment

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#)