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## With Palin On the Ticket, Evangelicals Are Energized

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ST. PAUL, Minn., Aug. 31 -- Outside his evangelical church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on Sunday, David Chung was mobbed by friends and church members suddenly excited about the Republican ticket. "I had half a dozen people come up to me," said Chung, a delegate to the [Republican National Convention](#). "It's a night-and-day change."

[Ralph Reed](#), former director of the [Christian Coalition](#), reported the same reaction at his church in Atlanta to [John McCain](#)'s selection of Alaska Gov. [Sarah Palin](#) as his running mate. "It's really extraordinary," Reed said.

For Christian conservatives, who watched with dismay as their issues were ignored or trivialized during the long Republican primary, the surprise addition to the [GOP](#) ticket of a woman raised in a Pentecostal church, who once described herself as "pro-life as any candidate can be," has transformed an election many had come to regard with indifference. Now Republicans such as Reed -- who describes the Palin selection as a "shot directly into the heart of the evangelical movement" -- hope the party will benefit in November from a crucial part of its base that is as energized as the young supporters of Democrat [Barack Obama](#).

Democratic electoral gains, the loss of vocal champions such as former House majority leader [Tom DeLay](#) (R-Tex.) and the failure of any GOP presidential candidates to emerge as a successor to [President Bush](#) in championing their causes were signs that evangelicals' influence was ebbing. The emergence of McCain, who famously denounced leaders of the Christian right in his first presidential race in 2000, seemed to signal further decline.

"Everybody was depressed. Everybody," said Colleen Parro, executive director of the Republican National Coalition for Life.

But McCain's performance at the Saddleback Church candidates forum two weeks ago -- in which he solidly reaffirmed his antiabortion stance -- "perked up" social conservatives, said [Tony Perkins](#), president of the [Family Research Council](#). That was followed by the GOP's adoption of a party platform that pleases conservatives.

Now, many evangelicals say Palin offers a fresh opportunity to rejuvenate their movement.

"These are people who have been beat up and beat up by their Republican allies time and time again," said Alan Wolfe, who directs [Boston College's Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life](#). "Their gratitude is actually unseemly. They have leapt up to embrace her without knowing much about her."

Palin's political résumé meets all the essential tests for social conservatives: She opposes same-sex marriage and providing benefits to domestic partners; she backs banning embryonic stem cell research and has raised the idea of teaching creationism alongside evolution in public schools.

In her private life, her religious background -- a spokeswoman for Palin said she regularly attends many nondenominational churches -- and particularly the decision she said she made to have her fifth baby despite being told he had Down syndrome, are powerful testaments for many Christian activists.

Cathie Adams, Texas's incoming national committeewoman, said she is elated to have someone like herself running for one of the nation's highest offices. "It's very exciting to have a person who holds the faith," Adams said after arriving in St. Paul. "I'm sure this is a woman who believes, as I do, let's present evolution and creationism on a level playing field, because when that happens, we know education is happening, not brainwashing, not politics in the classroom."

Jessica Echard, an activist with the Republican National Coalition for Life, said she "wasn't going to put a McCain bumper sticker on my car or a yard sign up" at her Northern Virginia home. "Now, I can't wait to get my McCain-Palin bumper sticker."

On Tuesday night, 700 antiabortion activists are expected to attend the "Life of the Party" reception at the Crowne Plaza ballroom in St. Paul. Palin had been selected as the guest of honor long before she became McCain's running mate, but since the announcement, Parro said, calls have been flooding in from delegates wanting tickets.

In hotels and restaurants throughout St. Paul and Minneapolis, evangelicals are discussing how best to steer their party toward the right even as its candidate has played down his conservative credentials.

Several evangelical leaders said Sunday that the glee in their community may be more intense because of a sense that they avoided something much worse. For days leading up to last week's vice presidential announcement, evangelicals and conservative Christian voters were tightly coiled, ready to explode in anger if McCain picked a supporter of abortion rights as his running mate.

Conservative activists working on the party's platform traded worried e-mails, discussing how to react if McCain betrayed their values by choosing [Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman](#) (I-Conn.) or former Pennsylvania governor [Tom Ridge](#), both of whom favor abortion rights.

"There was such a palpable fear of what might happen to the party had McCain gone in a different direction," Reed said. "Given the often complex and difficult relationship that McCain has had in the past with this pro-life community, he has exceeded their expectations."

Reed said McCain's public flirting with Ridge and Lieberman was a brilliantly executed "head fake" to make people even more excited when Palin's name was announced. "It made the normal enthusiasm go off the charts," he said.

Although evangelicals across the country and those in town for the Republican convention heaped praise on Palin, many acknowledged that they were still researching her policy positions and personal background. Chung said he is focused on the fact that she is "pro-life, pro-family, pro-smaller government," even if he doesn't know to what church she belongs.

"I'm more concerned that the candidate hold the same views that I do than if they have the same religion as I do, though it would be nice," Chung said.

At the [New Hope](#) Church north of Minneapolis, the Family Research Council's Perkins preached at two services Sunday morning about the responsibility of Christians to be involved in their communities. But afterward, he said, everyone wanted to talk about Palin.

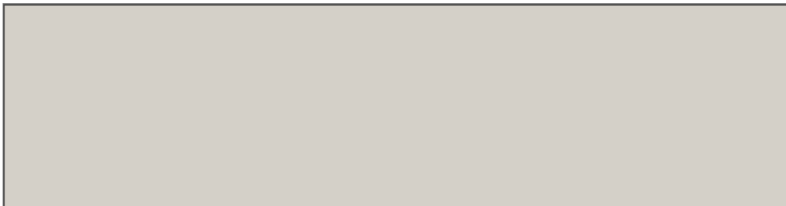
"The campaign has turned around in the past 72 hours in terms of the enthusiasm," he said.

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