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For the Republican Base, Palin Pick Is Energizing

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NORFOLK -- Bill and Sandra Goode were so worried that [John McCain](#) might pick a running mate who favored abortion rights that Bill called McCain's presidential campaign headquarters to warn against it. They prayed. And when the Republican senator picked Alaska Gov. [Sarah Palin](#), whom they had barely heard of but knew to be staunchly antiabortion, Sandra Goode said, "we knew our prayers had been answered."

The Goodes would have voted for McCain no matter what, but Palin lifted them to a new level of motivation. They called the volunteer McCain representative in their town of Surry, Va., offering any help they could.

"She's a real catalyst," said Bill Goode, 63, an electrician. "Sarah is the epitome of pro-life. You can tell how effective she is by the reaction she got. If she was someone who wasn't viewed as a threat to the abortionists, there wouldn't have been a response equivalent to this."

Palin's debut has invigorated the Republican base here in the Hampton Roads region of Virginia, a battleground area in a top swing state, and one where [GOP](#) turnout depends heavily on evangelical Christians such as the Goodes, along with the many military families clustered around the Norfolk and Portsmouth bases.

The reaction has been remarkably instantaneous, with socially conservative voters who had barely heard of Palin electrified by the few facts they quickly learned: her longtime membership in the Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination; her large family; her opposition to abortion even in cases of rape and incest; her decision to carry to term her fifth child after learning he has Down syndrome; and her belief in teaching creationism alongside evolution in public schools.

But the question facing Republicans here is whether their organization can match, and fully capitalize on, the enthusiasm provided by Palin with just two months left until Election Day. As [Obama](#) targets Virginia and its 13 electoral votes -- [President Bush](#) won the state with 54 percent of the vote in 2004 -- he has built a formidable organization, with 41 offices to McCain's nine, dozens more paid staff members, and far more time spent manning phone banks and

going door to door.

GOP activists report with relief that socially conservative voters who might have stayed home on Election Day say they will turn out now, while others say they will campaign more actively for the ticket. Among those coming out of the woodwork, activists say, are some who have not been active before, such as parents of special-needs children who feel a bond with Palin. The reaction was slower for less-religious Republicans, including ones with military backgrounds who wondered about Palin's qualifications, but after her tough convention speech, many of them are also energized.

"Hearing her pro-life stance, her conservative values, her family orientation -- it has really resonated with the proletariat and caused people to say: 'Hey, I'm going to get involved here. This is someone I can relate with; this is someone that can win,' " said David Willis, an electrical engineer and GOP activist in Smithfield. "I don't want to imply the party's been limping this whole time, but with Sarah, McCain really emboldened it."

Interviews with Republican activists in the Hampton Roads area confirmed that the party is lagging in the organizational department, though most expressed confidence that, with the spark of Palin's debut, they have time to catch up. The deficit lies partly in the parties' differing approaches: Republicans generally invest less in get-out-the-vote efforts than Democrats, because they say they know who their base voters are and they know that those voters need less encouragement.

But this year the contrast is particularly sharp. Unlike Bush's 2004 campaign, which focused heavily on turnout operations, McCain has devoted most of his resources to ads, while Obama has emphasized organization as perhaps no Democrat before him.

Obama has made big gains in registering new Virginia voters, with 49,000 additions in August, 36 percent more than signed up in July. The campaign says it held 1,000 house parties in Virginia to watch Obama's convention speech, with many of the 13,000 attending also canvassing over the Labor Day weekend.

Because Virginia has been so reliably Republican in presidential elections for decades, Republicans here -- unlike in perennial swing states such as Ohio -- are unaccustomed to having to exert all that much effort. And until Palin burst on the scene, Republicans here said there just was not a lot of the energy needed to fuel a grass-roots operation, because of Bush's decline in popularity, lingering ambivalence about McCain and demoralization from recent GOP losses in the state.

"Everything was pretty lackluster," said Earl Hall, the volunteer representative for Surry, who is far more excited now that Palin's in the picture: "She's right good-looking -- that's all I need to know."

In [Isle of Wight County](#), a GOP stronghold just west of Portsmouth and home to the ham capital of Smithfield -- Bush won 63 percent of the vote there in 2004 -- the county party had gone defunct until last month, when several previous members and several new arrivals decided that, with the election coming up, they ought to resurrect it.

They placed an ad in the paper and called 100 names on the old membership list. A dozen people expressed interest, and they now meet every other week. On Thursday, they organized a house party to watch McCain's speech. Thirteen people showed up to watch and dine on snacks with American-flag paper plates and napkins. Their reaction to McCain's speech was muted, with some of the loudest applause coming when he mentioned Palin.

They also plan to set up a table at the county fair, but otherwise their outreach has been limited -- a few sessions of phone-calling and a few door-to-door canvasses by a couple of core members, during which they distributed generic GOP literature because they have not yet received any McCain brochures. They have had trouble getting bumper stickers and have run out of lawn signs. They still need to assign captains for most of the county's dozen precincts, and will not expect anything from those volunteers except manning the polls on Election Day -- unlike the Obama campaign, which expects precinct captains to spend weeks finding ways to reach out to their neighbors.

John Brannis, a retired Army lieutenant colonel and military contractor employee who volunteered for the Bush campaign in the county in 2004, was not concerned, saying that calling voters or knocking on their door was not worth the effort -- Republicans had done fine in 2004 despite doing little of that. It is more effective, he said, to chat with people on his daily rounds, like the older woman who asked him to pump her gas the other day.

"People here know that if you want to know about Republican Party, talk to J.B. Brannis," he said. "It needs to be about personal relationships."

Cristina Morris, who moved to Isle of Wight last year from [Fairfax County](#) with her husband, an officer with the Navy Judge Advocate General's Corps, was surprised that she has wound up as the chairwoman of the resurrected county party. "We didn't think we'd be running it, but someone has to do it," she said.

The picture is similar around the area. In Surry, Hall has not gone door to door yet, saying that "it's too expensive driving around." "If people can't get the information they need now with all the media floating around, then they've got a problem," he said. In Suffolk, Steve Trent, a salesman leading the volunteer effort, is holding off on canvassing until he has literature for all the GOP candidates on the ticket. But, he said, Palin's instant celebrity will overcome any delays.

"What woman do you know who could shoot a moose, field-dress it and serve it?"

he said. "This has really energized the conservative side of the house."

Gail Gitcho, a McCain spokeswoman in Virginia, said that the campaign is satisfied with its progress and that Palin's selection was already having palpable effects, most visibly in an increase in the number of women volunteers turning out to make phone calls at the campaign's offices. "We have a lot more work to do but we're feeling very good about Virginia," she said.

How much evangelical Christian support McCain would have drawn without Palin is open to debate. It was in Virginia Beach, home to Pat Robertson's Regent University, that he gave his 2000 speech labeling Robertson and [Jerry Falwell](#) "agents of intolerance." But he later reconciled with them and impressed evangelical Christians with his performance at a forum at the Saddleback mega-church in California last month.

Palin's appeal among evangelical Christians may not be universal. Some may be put off by her overt religious references, as when she called the war in Iraq a "task that is from God" at an Alaska church and asked members of the congregation to pray for the natural gas pipeline she is trying to get built. Many younger evangelicals have elevated issues such as global warming, which Palin does not think is necessarily caused by greenhouse gas emissions.

But Charles W. Dunn, dean of the government school at Regent University, said that her stances on "family values" issues "trump the others" and that evangelical Christians have been "transformed into worker bees" as a result of her selection. "Early returns suggest an all-out embrace. She has created a buzz like I've never seen before," he said. "These folks felt hopeless, and all of a sudden they've been given hope overnight and beyond measure."

Peyton White, a McCain activist in Newport News, concurred, saying that she would feel much more comfortable now in approaching other members of her church to help campaign, because they identify with Palin and see her as paving the way for others like them. "People see her as one of them," she said. "There's a feeling that this is something all of us could be transformed into, because she's done it now."

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