



Is Gov. Palin the 'secret weapon' for Sen. McCain in Rural America?

Supporters wonder why Obama continues to trail McCain in rural polls

By Sara Wyant

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By all conventional standards, Sen. John McCain is not courting what some might call the "traditional" farm vote in his race for the presidency---members of those interest groups and trade associations who are strong supporters of commodity price supports. In fact, some might argue that he's gone out of his way to alienate this voting block, with his opposition to subsidies in the farm bill and for ethanol.

For example, consider his comments made this week to an invitation-only group at the Harry Truman Library in Independence, MO.

"My administration will reduce the price of food by eliminating the subsidies for ethanol and agricultural goods," said McCain. "These subsidies inflate the price of food, not only for Americans but for people in poverty across the world, and I propose to abolish them." Comments like that, made in the midst of corn country, make him about as popular as a skunk in church.

Little wonder then, that some corn growers cringe when they hear his remarks. To demonstrate their frustration, six former National Corn Growers Association presidents signed up to endorse his Obama campaign. This week, the Obama campaign sent out a new list of endorsers, including 34 individuals who previously held government jobs as state rural development directors. And the Nebraska Farmer's Union Political Action Committee (PAC) signaled their endorsement last week.

However, frustrations aren't limited to the corn growers. John McClung, a former GOP political appointee who is now the President and CEO of the Texas Produce Association, recently endorsed Obama at the group's annual convention in McAllen, TX.

Obama supporter and rural co-chair Marshall Matz recently told participants at that annual meeting:

"This farm bill was the very best ever for Specialty Crops. Obama supported the bill and McCain opposed the bill. If you are in the produce industry and want to live like a Republican, vote Democratic."

McCain is still ahead

So why is McCain still ahead in the polls across Rural America? Is it because some farmers still agree with him on other issues like taxes and trade? His farm and rural co-chairs, former Secretary of Agriculture John Block and Missouri Farm Bureau President Charlie Kruse think that's definitely part of the answer.

Is it because rural non-farmers, who make up more than 99% of the 65 million Americans who live in Rural America, don't like large farm subsidies either? Both Senators Obama and McCain have supported capping farm program payments at \$250,000.

Or is it because some farmers don't trust Sen. Obama's long-term commitment to corn-based ethanol any more than they do McCain's?

The Illinois Senator recently told the National Farmers Union that he supports the Renewable Fuels Standard that mandates the use of ethanol and has consistently supported renewable energy legislation. But on NBC's Meet the Press, the late Tim Russert asked Sen. Obama whether he would you be willing to change ethanol subsidies so that people are not using corn for ethanol and would see lower food prices? His answer follows:

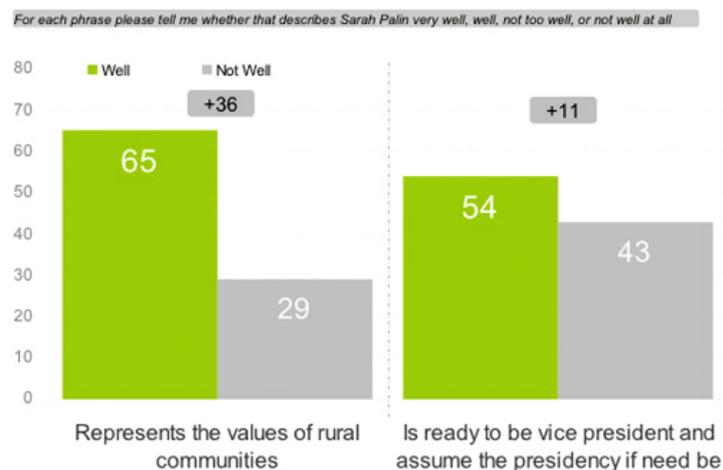
"We've got rising food prices here in the US. In other countries we're seeing riots because of the lack of food supplies. So this is something that we're going to have to deal with. There are a number of factors that go into this. Changes in climate are contributing. There's no doubt that biofuels may be contributing to it. My top priority is making sure that people are able to get enough to eat. And if it turns out that we've got to make changes in our ethanol policy to help people get something to eat, then that's got to be the step we take. But I also believe that ethanol has been a important transitional tool for us to start dealing with our long-term energy crisis ultimately. Over time we're going to shift to cellulosic ethanol, where we're not using food stocks but we're using wood chips & prairie grass."

The Palin Factor

Some have suggested that McCain may have connected with rural voters on social issues and his running mate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, especially embodies many of their small-town values. A working mom and owner of a fishing business, she understands the challenges of raising children in a rural area and issues like education and health care.

According to a poll released Sept. 22, 2008, by the Center for Rural Strategies on behalf of the National Rural Assembly, McCain leads Obama by 10 points among rural voters in key battleground states. Those numbers are virtually unchanged since the last Rural Strategies/National Rural Assembly poll taken in May. But other measurements in the poll indicate that McCain's popularity is rising with rural voters. One reason: Palin is very popular with rural voters, as the chart below indicates.

Palin Identifies with Rural Voters



Indiana farmer Jim Moseley, who served as USDA's Deputy Secretary under Secretary Ann Veneman and is now a McCain supporter, says voters connect with McCain and Palin on "main street issues" like controlling taxes and regulation are playing well across the heartland.

"John McCain supports reducing the estate tax to 15% and permitting a \$10 million exemption to farmers and ranchers so they can pass their farms down to the family

members. Given the recent increases in farmland values, this is a tremendous concern," Moseley adds. With some farmland going for \$5,000 an acre in the Midwest, landowners would reach that limit with 2,000 acres.

Sen. Obama told the American Farm Bureau Federation that he would retain a 45% rate on estates worth more than \$7 million per couple. And he would support a "reasonable estate tax policy that would effectively repeal the estate tax for 99.7% of estates." Using that same \$5,000 land price as an example, farm couples owning 1,400 acres would be impacted.

Moseley, who is also a pork producer, says he's also very concerned about livestock production under an Obama administration because of statements made about cracking down on confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). When you consider that over 75% of farmers have some type of CAFO for raising livestock, his (Obama's) comments don't bode well for any continued investment in that sector."

Nov. 4 will tell

It's still too early to tell whether or not rural voters will stay with McCain and help him in key battleground states like Missouri and Ohio. Democratic pollster Anna Greenberg of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, which conducted these polls, pointed out that McCain's overall improvement with Gov. Palin did not translate into more voters preferring him in the November election.

"We think that's because he has failed to make an effective argument on the one issue rural voters care about most -- the economy," she said. "Rural voters seem to be trying to decide which candidate can best address their economic concerns, and that means the rural battleground could be more competitive than we saw in 2004."