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Conservative Christians energized by McCain-Palin ticket

Michael Humphrey | Sep. 3, 2008

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Evidence that conservative Christians might sit out the 2008 election appears to be crumbling here at the Republican National Convention. As the first full day of the delayed convention got under way, evangelicals and Catholic delegates were expressing new excitement over John McCain.

The sentiment was repeated over and over: a ?homerun? performance at Saddleback Church -- where Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain answered questions last month -- and the addition of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as vice presidential nominee, convinced the religious right that McCain really was one of them.

?There was some talk about Christians staying home, but that?s over,? said David Barton, an evangelical Christian from near Fort Worth, Texas ?And I?ve been telling my friends not to listen to Obama or McCain. Just see how they voted. McCain is right on judges, he?s right on life issues, he?s right on the marriage issue. We can talk about some things I didn?t like, but when it comes to Biblical teaching he?s the obvious candidate.?

The potential rift between so-called secular and religious conservatives is not materializing, not in the way that the Obama-Clinton rift bubbled underneath the surface the first few days of the Democratic convention.

John Green, senior fellow in religion and American politics for the Pew Research Center, said that the conservative Christian malaise ? which Pew tracked as recently as middle August ? could be turned around this week by the delegates.

?A lot of people tend to think that delegates aren?t important,? Green said. ?But if you step back, you?ll see the delegates are a direct line to the grass roots. And the affect they have on religious conservatives can be two-fold. They can go home after the convention and start spreading the word. But their enthusiasm this week, as it translates to television, will also have a real impact.?

Last night?s raucous reaction to two speakers admired by evangelicals, President Bush via satellite and former Sen. Fred Thompson, was the first indication that they are engaged.

??We need a president who doesn't think that the protection of the unborn or a newly born baby is above his pay grade,? was a Thompson line that easily drew the biggest roar of the night.

The pivot: Palin and Saddleback

But the real proof begins tonight, when Palin makes what will easily be the most important speech of her career. If the survey of delegates yesterday was any indication, she will be met with the kind of fervor Democratic nominee Barack Obama received last Thursday night.

?I think she has energized this party in a way that nobody else could have,? Barton said. ?That will come across.?

That?s important for the larger television audience, but for the delegates here, her stated positions on abortion and euthanasia, her views on government reform and her commitment to family have already won them over.

?She has five kids and I have five kids,? said Gloria Escudero of Puerto Rico. ?I can relate to her, but she?s also an extraordinary person.?

And McCain?s decision to pick her has shed new light on him, previously lukewarm delegates said. But before Palin, his discussion with Pastor Rick Warren at Saddleback Church already had conservative Christians here warming to him.

?When he was asked about what regrets he had in his life,? said Rebecca Pick, a Catholic from northern Virginia, ?and he said he regretted the failure of his first marriage. I thought that was amazing, how honest he was. That really had an affect on me.?

Pulling it together

It didn?t hurt McCain?s cause that Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney, McCain?s toughest opponents, quickly and sincerely endorsed him, Green said.

?It helps that it never really came down to a two-person showdown,? said Green. ?A lot of those candidates, including Mike Huckabee, did well but not so well that it led to bitterness. And the important thing is the race didn?t go on so long. Anyone going for one candidate that lost is bound to be upset. But the more time that elapses, more likely they?ll get over it.?

Barton, who is attending his fifth convention, supported Huckabee, who was the last major candidate to withdraw from the Republican race. He said he had some problems with McCain policies, but usually it fell on the side of political issues such as campaign finance reform and immigration.

?I?ll take 85 percent right over not right on almost anything,? Barton said. ?Huckabee was a more natural fit. I?ve known him for years. He was the most outspoken Christian, but Ronald Reagan didn?t speak about his faith and he was deeply faithful.?

Will they stay or go?

The key statistic for McCain, when it comes to shoring up conservative Christians, is enthusiasm. In Pew?s survey, which ended Aug. 10, among white evangelicals McCain?s strong support was 28 percent, compared to 57 percent for Bush four years ago. The same trend held true with Catholics. His strong support among all Catholics was 17 percent, compared to 27 percent for Bush in 2004.

The tepid feelings made sense. McCain supports stem cell research and he once called Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell an ?agent of intolerance.?

Their concerns over McCain didn?t push conservatives toward Obama, Green said. The survey shows similar evangelical support for Obama that Kerry got in 2004 and lower strong support among Catholics.

?What it could mean is that rather than choosing, those evangelicals that were not strongly in favor of either

candidate would just stay home or vote for a third party,? Green said.

That might still happen, but not if Barton has anything to say about it.
?We?ll be out there telling Christians they have no right to stay home,? Barton said. ?We are called to stewardship as Christians and voting is part of that stewardship. We have to energize and get our base out.?

But even if McCain can get the evangelical vote to match Bush?s, he?s not done yet. Green said that accomplishment will simply put McCain back on level ground.

?He still needs to reach out to independents,? Green said. ?It?s the same challenge Obama had last week. First, he has to pull together his base, but then he needs to reach the undecided.?

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