

Palin's Western background could provide GOP boost in November

By MIKE SACCONI

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Provided Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin can navigate her way past a slew of recent personal and political revelations, her stance as a Westerner could provide a much-needed boost to the GOP ticket in November, political observers said this week.

Floyd Ciruli, a Denver-based pollster, said Palin's place as John McCain's running mate could provide a boon to the ticket if the campaign seizes on her mantle as an outdoorswoman.

Ciruli said even though hunters and fishers are a relatively small voting bloc, being seen as one of them is a powerful image among Western voters.

"We still, I think, revere it," Ciruli said.

According to polling data assembled by Pollster.com, McCain could use a boost in five Western states: Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Nevada and New Mexico.

In each of these states, McCain and his Democratic rival, Barack Obama, are running within 7 percentage points of each other.

The Democratic Party highlighted its desire to make inroads in the West last week at its national convention in Denver. There, Western leaders, including Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, highlighted demographic trends benefiting Democrats in the region.

Colorado itself has become emblematic of the Democrats' "New West," with the party taking over two congressional seats, a U.S. Senate seat, both houses of the state Legislature and the governor's mansion in 2004 and 2006.

Daniel Kemmis, a senior fellow at the University of Montana's Center for the Rocky Mountain West, said the fact the Republican candidates are from the West could impede the Democratic Party's resurgence in the West.

"It seems to me that McCain's choice of a running mate probably helps to blunt some of the momentum that the Democrats have been gaining in the region," he said.

As a result, Kemmis said the campaigns are essentially back to something of an even race that depends on how they play their cards in the final two months of the general election.

Before the GOP celebrates too much over the Palin pick, Robert Benedict, a political science professor at the University of Utah, said the McCain camp needs to sort out what role Palin could play in the executive branch.

Benedict said if she simply is window dressing, she could have little effect on voters attracted to her policy positions.

If she becomes a powerful vice president, akin to Vice President Dick Cheney, Benedict said her views on energy issues could appeal to the Western electorate.

"If that is the case, it could have a very powerful influence in terms of oil shale development, opening up additional western lands for (energy) development," Benedict said.