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## Palin Plans to Remain on GOP's National Stage

By Juliet Eilperin  
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Even in defeat, [John McCain](#) bequeathed an invaluable gift to his running mate, [Sarah Palin](#): the national prominence that could allow her to compete for the [GOP's](#) presidential nomination in 2012.

While the Alaska governor avoided speculating on a future [White House](#) bid in recent interviews, she made it clear that she intends to remain an important player within the party. And the national following she has developed among the conservative faithful over the past couple of months provides her with the sort of political and fundraising base that could support a run.

If Palin does seek the presidency, her campaign would be far different from McCain's. The senator from Arizona launched his bid in 2007 with the aim of forging a more inclusive, enduring Republican majority for the 21st century that would include Latinos, conservative Democrats and independents. Palin, by contrast, has sketched a far more conservative vision for the GOP, one of American exceptionalism in which free-market capitalism and traditional social values remain paramount.

The contest to become the GOP presidential nominee will begin almost immediately, but it also starts without a clear front-runner. Former Massachusetts governor [Mitt Romney](#), who spent vast sums of his own money on this year's primary contest, appears poised to run again. Louisiana Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#) is a favorite of many conservative thinkers and could challenge Palin for the affections of evangelical Christians. (He will also be among the first Republicans to take what will be widely read as a first step toward a bid on Nov. 22 when he appears at the Iowa Family Policy Center's "Celebrating the Family" banquet.) Minnesota Gov. [Tim Pawlenty](#), who was a finalist to become McCain's running mate, may also be among those who think the time is right to seek the White House.

For Palin, the Senate could also be a path to remaining on the national stage. If Sen. [Ted Stevens](#) (R-Alaska) is reelected but then forced from office because of his recent conviction on bribery-related charges, he would be replaced in a special election as early as next year. The state's other senator, Republican [Lisa Murkowski](#), will face reelection in 2010, and the possibility of Palin challenging her in a primary has been floated in some quarters.

Speaking at Bowling Green State University in Ohio recently, Palin remarked: "This is a great part of the country. The patriotism is so strong." Other times, she has suggested that Democratic nominee [Barack Obama](#) has apologized for his nationality, adding that by contrast, she McCain "are always proud to be Americans, and we don't apologize for being Americans." The question facing Republicans would be whether she will have the right message at the right time in 2012.

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"This traditional social conservative view that's represented by the Palin wing of the party is a declining viewpoint in this country," said Morris P. Fiorina, a Hoover Institute senior fellow and [Stanford University](#) political science professor. He added that while Republicans would be better off appealing to a broader swath of the electorate, sometimes political parties do not grasp this concept quickly. "It took the Democrats 12 years after Reagan and 20 years after McGovern to come back to the center."

Many Republicans also see Palin as having enough appeal to generate the kind of enthusiasm -- and money -- it takes to run a presidential campaign.

"She can raise a crowd, for one thing, which means she can raise money," said Dennis Colema, a 62-year-old retiree who came out to see Palin at a rally in Grand Junction, Colo. "Let's face it, McCain is a little dull in terms of dynamism."

[James Campbell](#), who chairs the political science department at the [State University of New York at Buffalo](#), said solidifying a fractured GOP could serve Palin well. "In this era of very polarized politics, it probably behooves the Republicans to stake out a very principled, conservative position and stick to it," he said, adding that Palin's greatest challenge lies in pursuing this goal while still serving in Alaska. "I'm not sure how she stays in the national spotlight and gains experience in the next couple years."

While Palin has not laid out a formal vision of where she would want to take the party -- her adviser Tucker Eskew told reporters recently that she planned to do that "after they're elected" -- she has made it clear that she does not intend to retreat from the public stage. Last month, she told ABC's Elizabeth Vargas that she would not "wave a white flag of surrender" in response to the criticism she has received, and she informed radio host [Rush Limbaugh](#) that she was unaffected by foes, including the mainstream media. "Well, yeah, I guess that message is they do want me to sit down and shut up," she told Limbaugh. "But that's not going to happen. I care too much about this great country."

Although Palin's message has resonated with conservatives, several prominent moderate Republicans have said that she lacks the experience and intellectual qualifications to serve in the White House. When former secretary of state [Colin L. Powell](#) endorsed Obama on NBC's "[Meet the Press](#)," he cited McCain's selection of Palin as one of his reasons.

"She's a very distinguished woman, and she's to be admired. But at the same time, now that we have had a chance to watch her for some seven weeks, I don't believe she's ready to be president of the United States, which is the job of the vice president," Powell said. "And so that raised some question in my mind as to the judgment that Senator McCain made."

GOP pundits such as [David Brooks](#) and [Peggy Noonan](#) have delivered even harsher assessments. In an interview with the Atlantic, Brooks said Palin "represents a fatal cancer to the Republican Party." Noonan made a similar observation in a [Wall Street Journal](#) column: "We have seen Mrs. Palin on the national stage for seven weeks now, and there is little sign that she has the tools, the equipment, the knowledge or the philosophical grounding one hopes for, and expects, in a holder of high office."

The reservations some voters have about Palin intensified over time in the [Washington Post-ABC News](#) poll. In the survey released Monday night, 44 percent of likely voters said McCain's choice of Palin as his running mate had made them less apt to vote for the GOP ticket.

And at the same time, voters in a Washington Post-ABC News poll from last week were split on the key question of whether she understands their problems. Fifty percent said yes, while 47 percent no.

In his concession speech last night, McCain suggested that he expects Palin to have a bright political future, calling her "one of the best campaigners I've ever seen." While the crowd interrupted him with enthusiastic applause, McCain pressed on, repeating the compliment: "One of the best campaigners I have ever seen, and an impressive new voice in our party for reform and the principles that have always been our greatest strength. . . . We can all look forward with great interest to her future service to Alaska, the Republican Party and our country.

*Research editor Alice Crites contributed to this report.*

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