

Right-wing values take on liberalism

Sarah Palin's presence on the political trail has punctured Obama's momentum. The Democrats need the focus back as the campaign reaches a crucial stage. **Karen McCarthy** reports from New York

It was an election about unity, non-partisanship and getting America back on track, until Senator John McCain reignited a war that could cost the Democrats the election.

It's not the race war of Senator Barack Obama, or the class war of former Senator John Edwards, or a clash between the voices of experience and idealism. It is a culture war that pits American right-wing values against liberalism. The election is no longer about the economy or foreign policy; it's about the division in American values that presidential candidate Pat Buchanan underscored in his 1992 convention speech.

"This election is about much more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe. It is about what we stand for as Americans," he said.

"There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war..."

The ferocity of the cultural resurgence was sudden and

unexpected. While many thought the nomination of Governor Sarah Palin for vice-president was the desperate act of a fading maverick, it quickly became apparent that the gun-toting, pro-life, Christian hockey mom, unleashed a right-wing fervour that was bubbling just below the surface.

"The choice of Palin is going to bring some of these issues, like abortion, same sex issues, the teaching of evolution in public schools, the whole role of what religion plays in public life, back to the campaign," Rob Boston, an analyst for Americans United for the Separation of Church and State told Politico last week.

The launch of Sarah "Barracuda" Palin onto the national stage as the all-American poster child of the conservative right has all the trappings of the 2004 election gambit, when the inclusion of gay marriage on 11 state ballots — the alleged brainchild of political consultant Karl Rove — helped push conservatives to the polls and seal President Bush's re-election.

With 112 estimated values issues on state ballots this year, Governor Sarah

Palin is a powerful evangelical flash-point that has given the conservatives something to rally around. She's the kindred spirit of the average American and small town, Christian women who didn't relate to Clinton feminists. She's the self-professed "pit-bull with lipstick" who's pushing terrorism, economic recession and Russian reassertion off the table in favour of hinterland values.

"Now the conservatives and the Republicans and evangelicals, they have got somebody to go out and work for, to root for, to help," Buchanan said during a recent MSNBC interview. "I think you've really got almost an even race in terms of enthusiasm, energy and fire."

McCain's shift from experience and unity into bare-knuckled partisanship also rallies the rural and socially conservatives by painting the Illinois senator as an elitist, too far left and out of touch with the American people. He's turned Buchanan's broadly directed attack against the left in 1992 into a pointed and often personal attack against Obama in 2008.

The Barracuda's punches are directed, repetitive, scripted and short on facts, but because of America's fascination with the mysterious, moose-hunting, beauty queen — whose family conflicts and corruption intrigue send ratings through the roof — she's getting away with it. She ridicules Obama's celebrity status, while capitalising on her own in photo ops and on magazine covers that showcase her family as the real unadorned Americans — as accessible as Obama is exotic.

The Republicans have found a way to make the media work for them.

When questioned about the practicality of putting a 20-month governor of a state with less than 700,000 people second in command, they swarmed to the airwaves to paint the Democrats as sexists and elitists, condescending to ordinary Americans like the Palins. Their amplified rallying cry spun any hint of criticism into a leftist denigration of her small-town values and further polarised the electorate.

The strategy is working. Polls show 58% of voters view Palin favourably

and 51% think McCain made the right choice. She helped put a two-point puncture in Obama's post-convention bounce and tightened up the race in battleground states like Iowa, Ohio and Florida. What's more, having lassoed the conservative base firmly onto the Republican bandwagon, McCain can reclaim his maverick mantle and try to appeal to the all-important independent and moderate voters who respond to Obama but not to Palin's far-right principles.

The Democrats counter-offensive begins this week by unleashing their other star. Senator Hillary Clinton stumps in Florida hoping to bring swing and blue-collar voters into the fold by focusing on issues that made her popular there.

Vice-presidential candidate Senator Joe Biden is emphasising his own humble small-town roots in an effort to woo the non-college-educated women that Obama has been unable to attract. But the six-term senator, foreign policy sage and quick-witted bruiser who could crush any opponent is being forced to curb his

barbs for fear of looking sexist or condescending. The result is unchecked Palin-mania and a Democrat looking staid on the stump.

Obama is attempting to stay above the fray by focusing on the issues in an effort to scoop up independent and middle-class voters. He's hyping the McSame ticket that agreed with President Bush 90% of the time, to debunk the notion that his rivals are a dynamic duo, galloping east to reform Washington for the people.

As the race enters the final stretch the Democrats are in trouble. They need the Palin infatuation to end and public interest to return to the issues. The need her scripted appearances before the Republican faithful to be replaced by a talk show circuit that demands an informed and authentic response to economic, terrorist, healthcare and energy woes.

Unfortunately, her first solo appearance will be a softball interview on ABC this week, which is a discouraging start for Obama-Biden.