

Obama, McCain both struggle to seal the deal with evangelical voters

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (ABP)—Heather Rosema is precisely the kind of Christian voter Sen. Barack Obama covets.

Rosema, 41, chose George W. Bush in 2000, when she put greater emphasis on issues like abortion and gay marriage. This year, she intends to vote Obama.

Rosema, a member of Roosevelt Park Community Christian Reformed Church, sees a true man of faith in the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee.

“He talks about God very easily,” said Rosema, of Grand Rapids. “I think that I hear that from him. They seem to be a Christian family.”

Mike Langerak, meanwhile, remains unimpressed.

“Obama has got a good line. He presents himself well. But his walk does not follow his talk,” said Langerak, a 50-year-old roofing contractor from suburban Hudsonville who also attends a Christian Reformed church.

Troubling positions

Langerak is most troubled by Obama’s support of abortion rights, but he doesn’t exactly sing the praises of Sen. John McCain, who has struggled to woo evangelical voters that flocked to Bush in 2004.

But Langerak is pragmatic when it comes to the Nov. 4 election. He

wonders about other Christian voters who look askance at McCain's conservative credentials.

"Some people said they would sit it out. ... But if you do not vote for McCain, then you are in effect putting Obama in," Langerak said.

Evangelical voters like Rosema and Langerak are a crucial constituency in the 2008 elections. In 2004, 78 percent of white evangelicals broke for Bush, and white Protestants overall voted for Bush by a two-to-one margin.

Few predict that kind of fervor for McCain, but it remains to be seen whether Obama can crack open the door to this GOP sanctuary.

Obama is not ceding evangelical votes. He visited Ohio this summer to tout expanded funding for social service programs run by religious groups.

"Do the Lord's work"

He also has circulated a pamphlet that is striking for its stark religious appeal. Beneath a photo of Obama at a pulpit with a large cross in the background, it reads: "My faith teaches me that I can sit in church and pray all I want, but I won't be fulfilling God's will unless I go out and do the Lord's work."

There is political work to do, given a March poll that found 13 percent of Americans mistakenly believe Obama is Muslim. Beyond that, Obama may continue to be haunted by his controversial former pastor in Chicago, Jeremiah Wright, with whom Obama cut ties in May.

McCain has issues of his own with religious voters.

In his 2000 campaign for the GOP nomination, McCain took on the religious right as he faulted the "politics of division and slander" and called Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell "agents of intolerance."

Last year, McCain finished last of nine Republicans in a straw poll at the Values Voter Summit for conservative activists in Washington.

In May, he was forced to dump the endorsement of religious broadcasters John Hagee and Rod Parsley after Hagee suggested the Holocaust was God's way of moving Jews to Israel, and Parsley called Islam an "antichrist religion" bent on world domination.

Can McCain close the deal?

Since then, the McCain campaign has stepped up efforts to assure evangelicals he is their candidate. But Calvin College political science professor Doug Koopman said McCain may have trouble closing the deal, especially as younger evangelicals gravitate toward issues like global warming, human trafficking and poverty.

"He has never been their candidate," he said. "John McCain has never been a religious exhibitionist."

Koopman noted McCain's libertarian strain of Arizona politics is not necessarily identified with conservative Christian concerns. What's more, "he is independent and strong-willed and in some sense unpredictable on issues."

Koopman also said Obama is tapping a new generation of evangelical leaders while old-guard icons such as Robertson are being wooed by McCain's campaign. "They are running a 2000 campaign when it comes to 2008," he said.

Of course, a mosaic of other factors—including turnout by black, young and new voters—will shape November's outcome. But Koopman believes evangelicals could be pivotal.

Religion "is a way into voters being comfortable with a candidate," he said.

If Obama can cut McCain's margin among evangelical voters from 78 percent to 68 percent, the election may be his, Koopman said.

Corwin Smidt, a political scientist who directs the Paul B. Henry Institute at Calvin College, noted that a major survey of religious voters by the institute found a shift toward Democratic candidates.

"One of the things our survey revealed is that the kinds of issues that Obama is stressing would resonate with that particular group," Smidt said.

Some evangelicals hint at buyer's remorse after supporting Bush.

"I was fed up with the Clintons and all of the personal drama. I was looking for somebody to stand up for his faith," said Sharon Smith, 40, whose husband, Reggie, is the pastor at Rosema's church.

Smith, however, grew disillusioned by some Bush policies, including the decision to invade Iraq. She concluded that Bush "misused his faith" to justify political decisions.

She intends to vote for Obama because of his stand on issues like social justice and health care.

"I have come to a point where faith is a personal thing for each candidate," Smith said. "I am looking at their stand on policies and how they are going to affect the nation."