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Palin sharpens focus on West's uneasy relationship with Uncle Sam  
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The political conundrum that is the American West has burst into full exposure, thanks to Sarah Palin.

Led by Barack Obama, Democrats are attacking John McCain's running mate as trying to have it both ways. She's selling herself as a government-cutting vice presidential candidate, they say, even though she fought hard for federal bacon as governor of Alaska.

But that conflict also holds true for Democrats. And like the region's geography, it plays out on a bigger scale in the West.

Westerners who live more than a day's drive from the Pacific Ocean tend to vote for Republican presidential candidates who promise to rein in the federal government, but they reward senators and congressmen and governors who champion federal earmarks.

Rare is the politician in any region -- Democrat or Republican -- who gets re-elected by lauding federal largesse he or she refused.

Alaska is an extreme example of this. Since the United States bought it from Russia in 1867, the state has been "kind of a ward of the federal government," said Frank Popper, a Rutgers University professor who, with his wife, has advocated for two decades that parts of the West should evolve into a depopulated "Buffalo Commons."

Alaska has more federal land than any other state, with two thirds of the state owned by the federal government. It often has the highest per-capita federal spending, although Hurricane Katrina boosted Louisiana and Mississippi to the top in recent years.

Alaska also supplies large portions of the nation's fossil fuels, as well as other raw materials. It and other Western states contain some of the nation's biggest and most pristine national parks, which millions of Americans visit.

Citizens in Alaska and across the West point out that federal spending and employment there is high partly because those states host Air Force bases and intercontinental missiles that have stood ready to defend the country since the beginning of the Cold War.

But like a tenant with a distant landlord, Western states also tend to feel a certain disrespect for federal authority.

"This creates an entirely different politics, where you have the federal government as sort of combination landlord and zoning board and sugar daddy," Popper said. "Those are three conflict-of-interest roles. And what you are seeing, in part, is this playing out through Sarah Palin."

Right after the Republican Convention ended, Obama attacked Palin for claiming she was against federal earmarks, including a controversial "bridge to nowhere" that Palin initially supported but later opposed.

"I know the governor of Alaska has been saying she's for change, and that's

great," Obama said in Indiana. "She's a skillful politician. But, you know, when you've been taking all these earmarks when it's convenient, and then suddenly you're the champion anti-earmark person, that's not change."

But this line of attack might not be as clear as it first appeared.

Before the Democratic Convention in Denver, former Colorado Gov. Dick Lamm, a Democrat and budget hawk who has repudiated both parties on federal spending, said he believed Obama would be a hard sell in his state, ironically because of the federal presence there.

"There is a heavier rock to push uphill here for federal Democrats," Lamm said. "The federal government owns 36 percent of Colorado. We think of ourselves as more independent, though we have our hand out more skillfully than most of the states."

And there is plenty of federal spending hypocrisy to go around. Popper pointed out that "there is no medical school in the country that could run without federal money," and that many American institutions, including universities, judge their administrators by the amount of federal funds they procure.

"The impression I get from Sarah Palin is that she was perfectly effective at what both Mayor Daleys have done in Chicago, and the mayor of Denver has tried to do, and the supervisors in Orange County (Calif.) try to do," Popper said. "They are all doing this, and all she is really being penalized for is being particularly good at it."

If nothing else, Palin has sharpened geopolitical and cultural edges in this presidential election.

Popper said that when he and his wife Deborah, a City University of New York professor, dined at a small Italian restaurant in a heavily Democratic Manhattan neighborhood the weekend after the Republican convention, half the conversations he overheard from nearby tables were about Palin, and not all were kind.

"I actually heard expressions like 'trailer park,'" Popper said.

But for many Americans, Palin's moose-hunting, snow-machining image plays into the Western individualistic persona, and her ideology and family circumstances provide a conservative perspective on the image and role of women in modern public life.

"I think she has become the new Oprah, except she is the Oprah for the people who don't get Oprah," Popper said. "It is like they each are appealing to completely opposite crowds, each of which is about equally half the population."

Deborah Popper pointed out that Palin comes from a region where politicians often dress and campaign differently than they do in buttoned-down Washington.

By portraying herself as a "hockey mom," Palin has challenged the blue-suit, red-tie persona Americans have become accustomed to in their presidential and vice presidential candidates.

"She gets to make it very colorful, which is a difference from the politicians of these other places," Deborah Popper said.

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