



## Palin's down-home charm thrills local folks

By LIAM DILLON

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Craig Brush hadn't seen this kind of crowd since Elton John came to town.

The general manager of Germain Arena in Estero is used to selling out minor league hockey games and concerts, not speeches.

But Monday saw one of the biggest rock stars in American politics come to Southwest Florida for the first time.

"It's obviously something different than we've ever done before," Brush said.

Republican Vice Presidential candidate and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin packed Germain Arena with a frenzied crowd Brush estimated to be close to 8,000 people for a 20-minute speech emphasizing her folksy charm. Her brand of politics, blending policy with personality, has been the base of her appeal all over the country and not surprisingly the Republican stronghold of Southwest Florida proved no different.

"Her style of campaigning, either for mayor, for governor and now for vice president evokes a real emotional response," said Peter Bergerson, a Florida Gulf Coast University political science professor and occasional columnist for the Daily News. "People are looking for that when they're voting. Personality always trumps policy."

The thousands standing in a line that snaked all around Germain's parking lot Monday morning mentioned Palin's positions on issues like abortion, but her personality drew the best revues.

"She's just plain old common people," said Ken Baker, 86, from Port Charlotte.

"She's a real person," said Eva Tomlinson, 76, from Fort Myers. "She's captured the people in a way no one else has. Except Ronald Reagan."

When Peggy Merritt, 75, from Estero was looking for a Palin button, she chuckled at a plain one reading "Drill, Baby, Drill," a reference to Palin's support of offshore oil drilling. The button vendor directed Merritt to a different "Drill, Baby, Drill" button with Palin holding a shotgun and "looking like Jed Clampett."

"She's lively and country and I just like her," Merritt said.

If Southwest Florida likes Sarah Palin, Sarah Palin also needs to show she likes Southwest Florida back. No matter how much money she raised at two private fundraisers in Naples on Monday — and campaign officials wouldn't say — Palin's visit must help boost Election Day turnout from Collier and Lee county's 513,000 registered voters where Republicans outnumber Democrats by nearly two-to-one, Bergerson said. That's a significant base of potential support in this key swing state.

"This will be a topic of conversation and discussion for three or four days here," Bergerson said of Palin's visit. "(Voters) will remember that a month from now."

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