

Gore goes for the 'Erin Brockovich' vote

WASHINGTON — Some Gore backers are excited about two things in "Erin Brockovich."

No, two other things.

These Democrats think that the allure of the movie about a saucy working-class divorcee who wins a whopping class-action lawsuit against a California utility that poisoned a town's water augurs a Gore victory because the story is pro-environment and pro-tort.

"Texas has one of the worst records on the environment, while it's Gore's signature issue," crows a White House official. "And Bush is for tort reform, which is basically denying people the right to redress grievances through the court for having their lives blasted away."

Of course, John McCain should have been the one to benefit from a fascination with a Frank Capra fable about a little guy, or gal, beating the big, bad special interests. But now that the senator's out, Democrats are hoping that the vice president, who is chanting the words "John McCain" like a Buddhist mantra, can catch the populist wave.



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They harken to 1975, when Robert Altman's classic movie, "Nashville," eerily presaged Jimmy Carter's election after the Nixon disillusionment. "Nashville" was about a populist Southern presidential candidate, running on a platform assailing the old politics.

Al and W. are in a donnybrook to see who will win the beautiful Erin. Both candidates are trying, with the language they use and the issues they choose, to court waitress moms and soccer moms. Bush (who's promising to "cultivate the gardens of good will" among children) and Gore (who's booking himself on Lifetime, the network for women) are scaling back on the sports and war metaphors and focusing on children, schools and the future.

"Talking about the fourth down with five yards to go is offensive to a lot of women," explains Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster.

In guidelines written for Republican members of Congress, Luntz advises: "Women consistently respond to the

phrase 'for the children' regardless of the context." And "From getting the kids out of bed, fed and off to school each morning to the demands of working outside the home, women are working longer and harder than ever. Empathize."

Undaunted by Texas' grim record on pollution, Bush followed up on the unwily Wyls (who have announced they are dropping out of politics after pumping \$2.5 million into environmental attack ads on John McCain) with an environmental initiative. He knows how effectively his dad hammered Michael Dukakis for not cleaning up Boston Harbor.

Saying he did not want to leave "future generations a world of polluted air, toxic lakes and rivers and vanished forests," the Texas governor offered a plan to help clean up contaminated industrial sites.

"Bush wants to get rid of the Superfund and turn it over to the states when the state of Texas is awash in smoke," scoffs a Gore adviser, Bob Shrum.

Republicans are counting on using quotes from Gore's book, *Earth in the Balance*, which is being re-released for Earth Day 2000, to make him seem flaky and ex-

trême. Gore warns of "an ecological Kristallnacht" and thunders that our children could "inherit a wasteland."

Republicans are searching for his unedited text, which they hope will sound even flakier.

Luntz says that, polling for the Nature Conservancy, he came away feeling that women don't want programs as extreme as Gore's: "The suburban housewife wants to maintain the park down the street, not close the state of Colorado."

I called the real Erin Brockovich to see if she preferred Bush or Gore.

"Well, I grew up in a family that voted Republican," she said, still on the road, still on her cell phone and still battling Pacific Gas & Electric. "But for years I've voted with the Democratic Party. I would probably go with Gore."

I asked if she thought her movie was a good omen for the vice president.

"I would never let my ego go there," she said, laughing.

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Maureen Dowd's column appears Fridays and Sundays.