

Democrats in rural strongholds refuse to give backing to Obama

The conservative Appalachian heartlands voted overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton - and will switch to McCain in November

Paul Harris in Williamson, West Virginia

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Johnny Telvor was not happy about Barack Obama becoming the Democratic presidential nominee. Not happy at all.

Standing outside the sturdy courthouse in the sweltering heat of a West Virginia afternoon in the small town of Williamson, Telvor smoked a cigarette and bluntly gave his opinion of Obama's historic mission to be America's first black president.

'We'll end up slaves. We'll be made slaves just like they was once slaves,' he said. Telvor, a white Democrat who supported Hillary Clinton in West Virginia's primary, said he planned to vote for Republican John McCain in November. 'At least he's an American,' he added with a disarmingly friendly smile.

Such racist opinions are a rough antidote to the giddy optimism that has swept through much of America's chattering classes over the past week. Since Obama beat Clinton and finally became the Democratic nominee liberal pundits from New York to San Francisco have eagerly discussed how Obama's unique candidacy will put America's racially charged past behind it. The United States, they have argued, is finally prepared to elect a black president and absolve its historic sins of slavery and Jim Crow. But the uglier truth is that part of white America remains secretly - or sometimes openly - deeply distrustful of

the idea of a black president.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the vastness of the Appalachian mountains that run from Maine through West Virginia and all the way down to Georgia. Here Obama faces his greatest problem in convincing poor white citizens to vote for him. They certainly have not backed him so far. In West Virginia Clinton trounced Obama by more than 30 points. It is a place of deep poverty and astonishing natural beauty - and it is overwhelmingly white. Outsiders deride it as 'hillbilly' country. But it is also somewhere that has a special place in America's heart. Appalachia is where the TV series *The Waltons* was set. It is a place of deep family values, where clannish folk have created a vibrant mountain culture of God and guns. It is also a place not used to voting for a black politician. 'McCain will win here,' said Telvor. 'No doubt about it.'

Williamson is a typical slice of Appalachia. The town of 3,000 souls lies on the banks of the Tug Fork River, overshadowed by the mountains that surround it. A railway runs through the centre of town, which has long been used to hard times as the coal industry faded away.

The town is in the heart of Mingo County in West Virginia. In last month's Democratic primary, a staggering 88 per cent of people in Mingo County voted for Clinton - the highest number in the whole state - compared with just 8 per cent willing to put a cross by Obama's name. Those are landslide numbers that even some third world dictators would be embarrassed to record. And, as went Mingo, so went the entire state. 'This state is white, elderly and working class. This is not natural Obama country. People are not used to having black politicians on the ballot,' said Professor Allan Hammock, a political scientist at West Virginia University.

The sheer scale of Clinton's win in West Virginia - repeated throughout most Appalachian counties from Pennsylvania to Georgia - took many pundits by surprise. But it did not shock people in Williamson, Jack Spence among them. The elderly retiree, enjoying the hot weather on a street bench, said he voted for Clinton and, now she has lost, he plans to sit out the November election. 'I can't vote for a Republican. My daddy would just roll over in his grave,' he said. But

nor can he bring himself to vote for Obama, though he insisted it was not because of race. 'That does not matter to me. Though it might to a lot of folks around here,' he said.

Was there anything Obama could say during the coming campaign to convince him? 'Nope,' Spence replied. Then he broached the one issue many Americans consider off-limits: the potential security threat to Obama. 'Look, someone will kill him. Whoever Obama picks as running mate will end up being president.' Spence's ready smile and chatty manner on the thorny issue of Obama's possible murder gave little clue as to whether he thought it would be a bad thing or not.

Often such sentiments are dismissed as the ramblings of a few diehards, carrying with them the prejudices of a by-gone age. After all, Iowa, a very white state, was the place Obama first won. But the fact is Obama's Appalachian problem is very real.

Williamson and West Virginia are far from alone in rejecting Obama. Take Pikeville, Kentucky. It welcomes visitors with a cheerful sign that boasts it is one of 'the 100 best small towns in America'. But it is not friendly country for Obama. On Pikeville's main street, just outside a now abandoned Obama campaign office, Stanley Little laughed when asked if he could support Obama. 'I will vote for McCain,' he said. Little, a maintenance man for local offices, had one simple reason why he too was rejecting his long family history of voting Democrat. 'McCain is one of us. Obama ain't,' he said, leaving little doubt as to who he meant by 'us'.

Pikeville's rejection of Obama in Kentucky topped even Mingo County's. Pike County, a huge stretch of forest and hills in the east of Kentucky, voted for Clinton by a thumping 91 per cent versus a mere 7 per cent for Obama. Only nearby Magoffin County (where Clinton scored 93 per cent) is even less friendly to an Obama candidacy.

It is not just an Appalachian issue. There are pockets of this sentiment across America from the working class white suburbs of Philadelphia to the rust belt towns of Ohio and Michigan. Many poor, white Americans are prepared to flock to McCain rather than face a black occupant of the White House. No public courtship between Obama and Clinton - carried out on the nation's TV screens - is likely to change that. In Georgia a local bar owner has been selling T-shirts

featuring Obama being endorsed by a cartoon monkey eating a banana. The sale prompted outraged coverage in the local media but the T-shirts quickly sold out. In Vincennes, Indiana, an Obama campaign office was vandalised on the eve of the state's primary, its windows smashed and its walls spray-painted with the words ' Hamas votes BHO' (for Barack Hussein Obama).

The difficult truth is that Appalachia is unusual mostly because many people here are willing to openly talk about what some of their fellow citizens are secretly thinking. In exit polls of the recent primaries in Kentucky and West Virginia, one in five Democrats confessed to pollsters that race was a factor in their voting choice. 'West Virginia and Kentucky were just more honest than other parts of the country. A lot of other people know it's not socially acceptable to mention that sort of thing,' said Professor Andra Gillespie, a political scientist at Emory University and expert on racial politics.

Indeed much of America's media has been resolutely focused on a 'post-racial' vision of America despite the clear evidence that race remains a huge divide in American life. Obama's own bi-racial background and his campaign's language of inclusivity have conjured up a beguiling image of a race-free America. It has built on other recent black political successes in America, such as Newark mayor Cory Booker and Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick, who have won on the back of black-white voting alliances. There is truth to it too. Obama has run a remarkable campaign, winning many white states such as Kansas and Montana. He has attracted vast, racially diverse rallies, especially of young people who seem open to putting racial divides behind them. And indeed there is much hope that Obama can change things. Gillespie points out that recent studies have shown that white voters in US cities that have elected a black mayor for the first time prove far more willing to elect one for a second term. 'They realise the sky has not fallen in. That life went on,' Gillespie joked. If Obama does win the White House, that experience could be repeated on a national scale for all Americans. Few things could be more important in finally drawing the poison of racism out of American life.

But behind such optimism, another America looms. It is an America far from the headlines that have proclaimed Obama's candidacy a

revolution that will atone for a race-tinged history. This is the America where outrageous rumours that Obama is a Muslim are readily believed. It is the America where Telvor is able to voice a sentiment that 'Obama might actually be the antichrist' without apparent irony or fear of contradiction. It is a slice of America trapped in the dreadful history of race relations and the legacy of slavery and segregation.

On the streets of towns such as Pikeville and Williamson, and in the minds of people like Little and Telvor, that past lives on. It is kept in the present by poverty, joblessness and a fear of the different. It is also a powerful force that should not be underestimated. It could even decide who will be the next President. 'McCain will beat Obama. There's a lot of Democrats around here that will be switching side to vote for him,' Little said. Behind him a white-washed message in the closed Obama Pikeville office read: 'Vote Obama 08: change!' In the brutal summer heat it seemed a forlorn hope. It was asking for the overthrow of generations of entrenched prejudice. But, come November, a black president might finally be pulling up a chair behind the desk in the Oval Office. If he does, that slogan of change might just end up being a prophecy. Even in Appalachia.

Obama's policies

Economy Cut income taxes by \$1,000 for working families, and give a tax credit to all middle-class homeowners.

Iraq Immediately begin removing troops. Keep some soldiers to protect diplomats. Carry out targeted strikes on al-Qaeda.

Education Zero-to-Five Plan, placing key emphasis on early care and education for infants.

Environment Reduce carbon emissions by 80 per cent by 2050.

Civil Rights End ideological litmus tests within the Civil Rights Division.

End Racial Profiling Ban racial profiling by federal law enforcement agencies.

Health A national health plan for all including the self-employed.

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