

Obama supporters have uphill climb in Appalachian Virginia

As they push to win the dead-even battleground state, they are talking directly about race, betting that the best way to raise their neighbors' comfort level is to openly confront their feelings.

By Peter Wallsten

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The isolated towns of Virginia's Appalachian coal region are home to strong labor unions and Democratic political machines that date back generations. Yet voters here who eagerly pushed Democrats into the Senate and the governor's office are resisting Barack Obama.

Some Americans say Obama's race and uncommon background make them uncomfortable -- here those people include Democratic precinct chairmen and get-out-the-vote workers. Many Americans receive e-mails falsely calling Obama a Muslim -- here a local newspaper columnist has joked in print that Obama would have the White House painted black and would put Islamic symbols on the U.S. flag.

And so Obama's supporters, as they push to win this dead-even battleground state, are talking directly about race, betting that the best way to raise their neighbors' comfort level with the prospect of the first black president is to openly confront their feelings.

When Cecil E. Roberts, president of the coal miners union that shapes politics in much of this mountain region, talks to voters, he tells them that their choice is to have "a black friend in the White House or a white enemy." When Charlie Cox, an Obama supporter, hears friends fretting about Obama's race, he reminds them that they pull for the nearby University of Tennessee football team, "and they're black."

Union organizer Jerry Stallard asks fellow coal workers what's more important: improving their work conditions or holding onto their skepticism of Obama's race, culture or religion. "We're all black in the mines," he tells them.

The presidential campaign, in the almost all-white counties of southwestern Virginia, has produced an outcome that few people expected: a frank discussion of race. Voters sometimes sound as if they are reasoning with themselves and working through their own complex views as they talk through the choice they face this November.

"I've never been prejudiced in my life," said Sharon Fleming, 69, the wife of a retired coal miner, who spends hours at the union hall calling voters on behalf of Obama. "My niece married a black, and I don't have a problem with it. Now, I wouldn't want a mixed marriage for my daughter, but I'm voting for Obama."

Obama beat Hillary Rodham Clinton convincingly in the Virginia Democratic primary, but his supporters have known they face a challenge in this part of the state, just as Obama has faced challenges elsewhere among white voters from rural and working-class households.