

← Back to Original Article

CAMPAIGN '08: DEMOGRAPHICS

W.Va. could spell trouble for Obama

Scant support among white working-class Democrats, especially men, could dog him into November.

May 10, 2008 | Stephen Braun | Times Staff Writer

MOOREFIELD, W.VA. — In Hardy County, Democrats outnumber Republicans more than 2 to 1. But there is little enthusiasm for Barack Obama in this mountainside enclave, a portent of trouble for the Illinois senator in next week's West Virginia primary and the general election beyond.

Nearly 97% white, the county is as conflicted as any rural and working-class Democratic bastion as it struggles to adjust to the likely prospect of the party nominating its first African American presidential candidate.

Obama may have emerged from his double-digit victory over Hillary Rodham Clinton in North Carolina and his razor-thin loss in Indiana on Tuesday with a virtual lock on the Democratic nomination. But his performance did little to reassure political leaders here concerned by his sagging numbers among once-loyal white Democrats, who have steadily abandoned their party over the last several presidential elections.

"I'm not yet convinced that Barack Obama is more substance than fluff," said Clyde M. See Jr., a former Democratic speaker of the West Virginia House of Delegates and two-time gubernatorial candidate who heads a small law practice in Moorefield, the county seat. "He's a fine speaker, mind you, but I'm still not sure he's got the right stuff to win the general election."

The concerns of party members who live amid this rolling landscape of soybean fields, poultry plants and retirement cabins mirror those of many white Democrats nationwide: Some fear voters will be turned off by Obama's black heritage. Others, they say, will find reason to doubt his patriotism or will perceive him to be an elitist.

It remains unclear how racial unease will factor into election-day decisions come November. Those hidden impulses are elusively difficult to capture in polling. But seasoned Democratic players here reckon that some racially tinged voting will inevitably occur far beyond Hardy County's cresting hills.

"There's a lot of bigotry in the country, not just West Virginia," See said.

Fearful that the GOP will exploit Obama's "otherness," many still insist that Clinton's ebbing campaign offers the Democrats a better shot come November. Even those who say they would support Obama worry about his electability, convinced that many of their neighbors will defect to the presumed Republican nominee, John McCain.

"My worry is there's just too many people in this country who aren't ready to elect a black president," said Charles L. Silliman, a retired Air Force officer who is Hardy County's Democratic Party co-chairman. "There's a lot to like about him. But I'm just afraid that too many people will vote against him based on their fears and prejudice."

Silliman and his wife, Carmen, are Clinton supporters, drawn by her healthcare plan and her endurance on the campaign trail. Still, the couple repeatedly have found themselves defending Obama, correcting acquaintances who relay baseless rumors about his name and religion.

Carmen Silliman has collected a sheaf of poisonous e-mails that have flowed into her in-box. "We do not need a Muslim to lead the good ole USA," reads one. Obama is, in fact, a Christian.

Neil Gillies, an Obama supporter who runs a local environmental nonprofit group, glumly recounted the gibes that his wife, a schoolteacher, hears regularly from her students. "They're convinced [Obama] is a Muslim, a terrorist, a guy who's coming to take away their guns," Gillies said. "It's just sad."

Slung along the bottom of West Virginia's eastern panhandle, Hardy County was once rock-solid Democratic. Senior citizens fondly recall the day Eleanor Roosevelt arrived to dedicate the opening of Moorefield High School in 1941.

But socially conservative church groups and gun-rights supporters here have helped tilt the vote Republican in recent presidential elections. In 2004, Hardy County lined up for George W. Bush by a 3-1 ratio.

"It's just not going to be easy for Obama to woo crossover Democrats back into the fold," said P. Merle Black, a professor of politics and government at Emory University and a longtime analyst of Southern voting patterns. "In addition to the race factor, you've got huge cultural differences between them and Obama on guns and religion and many of the issues that would make those voters think he doesn't represent their interests."

Obama has made an effort to highlight his religious beliefs and his support for hunters' rights. But his former pastor's racially charged sermons -- and the candidate's own comments about small-town Americans who have lost their jobs and "cling to guns or religion" -- have not helped his cause.

"I've got 50-some guns, and I wasn't crazy about Obama's talk about small towns," said Sam Vetter, 64, a farmer and lifelong Democrat who regrets voting for Bush in 2000. "Besides," he added, "Obama just doesn't sound right for an American president."

Despite a well-financed television campaign and endorsements from Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV and Rep. Nick J. Rahall II, Obama is expected to finish well behind Clinton in West Virginia's primary, which will award 28 pledged delegates.

"We've got our work cut out for us," acknowledged Tom Bowen, a spokesman for Obama's West Virginia effort.

Democratic registration statewide is up by more than 16,000 voters since 2006, compared with an increase of 4,000 for the GOP. But that reflects "as much interest in the local races as there is in the national," said Greg Ely, Hardy County clerk.

Hand-lettered campaign signs promoting Democrats running for family-court judge and assessor cluster along Hardy County's winding roads. There are only a few signs for either Obama or Clinton, but in one yard, a placard with a red slash on it mocks, "Osama, Obama and Chelsea's Mama."

The sign belongs to Eric Hardy, 38, a former Democrat who works at a woodworking plant. Now a die-hard Republican and president of the West Virginia Coon Hunters Assn., Hardy opposes any Democrat "who wants to go after my guns."

Obama "takes the cake," he said, "because of, you know, who he is." He suspects Obama for his "Muslim name," and comments by his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., rankle him. "He's just a mistake any way you look at him," Hardy said.

Obama's support among white male voters, the most tightly contested bloc over the primary season, has slipped. He did well early on in states such as Virginia, where he took 52% of the white male vote to Clinton's 47%. But this week, Obama lost, 58% to 42%, among white men in Indiana and 55% to 42% in North Carolina. He has won majorities of white male voters in 10 states since January, but Clinton bested him in 13 others, including the critical northern battlegrounds of Ohio and Pennsylvania.

"This is the single biggest problem he faces," said William A. Galston, a former senior Clinton administration domestic policy advisor who considers Obama the apparent nominee after this week's results. "This is a party problem, not just his alone. But [Obama] has to be particularly sensitive to addressing these voters."

Galston credits Obama with trying to win over suspicious white voters by tailoring his North Carolina victory speech to talk more about his hardscrabble upbringing and his love of country.

"He needs to keep talking in comforting terms about the issues on people's minds and how his own story fits in with their concerns," Galston said.

Other analysts counter that Obama needs to mirror Clinton's populist economic pitch.

"The best way for Obama to make inroads with white voters in blue-collar, leaning-red states is to push economic issues to the front and continue to depict the war as a money pit," said Thomas F. Schaller, an associate professor of political science at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

For many of Hardy County's Democrats, though, there seems to be no appeal that will overcome who Obama is and what he represents.

"When we lost all those Democrats who voted for Bush in 2000 and 2004, I felt we just had to have a better bundle of goods to sell," See said.

"Problem is, I'm not sure we have those goods this time around."

--

stephen.braun@latimes.com

--

(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

Democratic race

Delegates needed for nomination, 2,025. Totals

as of Friday:

Barack Obama

Total delegates ...1,859.5

Pledged delegates ...1,588.5

Superdelegates ...271.0

--

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Total delegates ...1,698.0

Pledged delegates ...1,425.5

Superdelegates ...272.5

Source: Associated Press