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## Does Obama have Appalachian appeal?

**If Virginia becomes a swing state in this year's presidential election, Southwest Virginia could determine which way it swings. Religion, the economy and deep-felt patriotism could make the difference in the 9th Congressional District.**

By [Laurence Hammack](#)

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HAYSI -- Deep in Appalachia, a mountaintop Ferris wheel circles as high as the surrounding ridges while daylight fades to dusk. The county fair is in full swing here, on one of the few stretches of flat land to be found in Dickenson County: a former strip mine.

If this is not the edge of the political universe, it is somewhere close.

Yet Danny Edwards is talking politics. Standing next to the Democratic Party's booth, Edwards wears a Barack Obama sticker on his shirt. Truth be told, he voted for Hillary Clinton in the February primary, the way most county Democrats did.

Asked why Obama got just 12 percent of the vote in Dickenson County -- compared with Clinton's 85 percent -- Edwards hesitates for a second, as if the answer lies somewhere in the stream of passing fairgoers.

"A lot of people won't tell you so," he says. "But I honestly believe there are some ethnic overtones."

A few minutes later, Joe Puckett wanders into the conversation, his 16-month-old daughter perched on his shoulders. Puckett quickly confirms what Edwards suspects, repeating a common fallacy.

Obama is a Muslim, he declares, maybe one planted in the presidential race by Islamic extremists.

"If the people of America don't see the Muslim threat for what it really is," Puckett says, "then we're all going to be in a world of hurt."

### By the margins

If Virginia becomes a swing state in this year's presidential election, as the pundits are predicting, Southwest Virginia could determine which way it swings.

Obama is expected to do well in Richmond, Northern Virginia and other urban cores. Republican John McCain will likely fare better in rural areas. The difference could turn on the margin by which McCain carries the Appalachian vote, which in Virginia lies almost entirely in the 9th Congressional District.

"Margins matter," said veteran political analyst Larry Sabato.

"It could be what saves McCain in Virginia. He's the first Republican since Gerald Ford in 1976 who actually has to worry about carrying Virginia. And the margin in the 9th could save him."

Sabato believes McCain will win easily in the 9th, which has a history of fluctuating between red and blue. Republican candidates have carried the district five times in presidential elections since 1976; Democrats have won three times.

Democrat Rick Boucher, the district's longtime representative in Congress, believes Obama must capture at least 45 percent of his district's vote if he is to become the first Democratic presidential candidate to win Virginia since 1964.

A sprawling district the size of New Jersey, the 9th can lean right on issues such as the war, pulled by a strong sense of patriotism, while leaning left when it comes to financial policies that benefit its more economically troubled areas.

"Appalachia, ideologically, is at war with itself," said Stephen Mooney, a faculty member of the Appalachian Studies Program at Virginia Tech.

"Broad-based assumptions give way to a very complex reality: Co-existing simultaneously you have a deep-set conservatism and a deep-set liberalism. Co-existing simultaneously you have a region that has rebelled against American political and economic ideologies and a region that has probably the most deeply felt sense of patriotism than any other place in the nation."

### **Obama to fight for 9th**

Known as the "Fighting 9th," the district gave Obama a bruising in the February primary. While Obama won by 29 percentage points statewide, Clinton crushed him by 32 points in the 9th, the only district she won in Virginia.

Clinton benefited from being the better-known candidate in a place where newcomers stand out. "Voters in the Appalachian region tend to be more traditional, and that means the people take a bit longer to be persuaded that something new and different is better than the tried-and-true approach," said Boucher, who endorsed Obama a month before the primary.

This time, Obama is determined to make Southwest Virginia a battleground.

He came to Bristol in June to kick off his general election campaign, after securing a Democratic nomination that he will accept this week at the party's convention in Denver.

And while McCain has no Virginia campaign offices west of Roanoke, Obama has opened locations in Blacksburg, Bristol, Big Stone Gap and Castlewood.

Still, interviews with voters suggest that even in the areas where Democrats are most welcome, Obama remains the out-of-town stranger.

His middle name is Hussein, some people point out. His father, who was not involved in Obama's upbringing and is now deceased, was once a Muslim. And then there's the Internet and e-mail chatter about the "Jihad candidate" working with Middle East extremists.

No matter how dubious, questions about Obama's faith have a way of spreading through a region where a 100-foot-tall steel cross greets Interstate 81 motorists at the state line near Bristol.

"This is a very, very religious community," said Jerry Gray, a former commonwealth's attorney of Dickenson County who remains active in Democratic politics.

"Some of my friends who I consider to be reasonable people have looked me in the eye and said: 'I can't vote for him because he's a Muslim.' "

Kevin Griffis, communications director for Obama's Virginia campaign, said staffers are "countering these lies with the truth -- that Barack Obama is a committed Christian and has been for 20 years. He was never a Muslim."

Campaign officials in far Southwest Virginia "aren't actually encountering the smear on a daily basis," Griffis said. "But we know it's out there, and we know we have work to do."

### **Racial or cultural divides?**

The town of Clinchco, population 410, is pinched tight between the McClure River and steep mountain walls. Of the few blacks in Dickenson County -- the census counted just 58 out of 16,395 residents -- most live here.

Locals used to have another name for Clinchco. They called it N----- Hollow, said Edna Gulley, who lives in a double-wide on Main Street and is considered the unofficial representative of the local black community.

While things are better now, "the people who say there's no racism here are the ones who are in denial," Gulley said. A few months ago, her grandson found a noose hanging in the bathroom of the local high school. Gulley recalled that some people said it was just a small noose.

"I said: 'It doesn't matter,' " Gulley said. "That's a threat. You can take a bread tie and make a noose out of it and show it to me, and to me that's a threat."

Like other Obama supporters in this heavily Democratic county, Gulley believes that in the end, voters uneasy about race will decide they'd rather have a black man in the White House than another Republican.

But when residents of such a predominantly white area say they can't vote for a Muslim, could that be another way, perhaps a more acceptable way, of saying they can't vote for a black?

"As much as I wish that I could not say this, the realistic part of me agrees that yes, [Muslim] is to some degree a code word" for race, said Mooney, who grew up in Dickenson County.

But to Mooney, the region's concerns about Obama are based more on culture than race.

"There is a very ironic fear of the 'other,' the different, which is ironic because mountain people have long been perceived nationally as one of the great American 'others,' " he said.

"So you would think that mountain people would be very careful not to 'other' other people" -- Obama included, Mooney said. "But at a very deep-set level, there is culturally a fear ... to venture into the unknown."

Hugh O'Donnell, a legal aid lawyer in Norton, agreed: "People fear what they don't know sometimes, and they don't necessarily know a whole lot about African-Americans here, and they don't know anything at all about Muslims."

But just because the 9th District is 93 percent white, that doesn't mean there's no hope for a black candidate. Doug Wilder did well enough there, taking 48 percent of the vote en route to becoming the nation's first black governor in 1989.

"It ain't because he's black," Democratic political consultant Dave "Mudcat" Saunders said of the challenge Obama is facing. "If it's about race, then all Barack Obama has got to do in the 9th District is do as well as Doug Wilder did 20 years ago, and he wins Virginia."

In Saunders' view, Obama needs to win over rural voters the way another big-city stranger, Mark Warner, did when he embraced the culture and won its support in his successful run for governor in 2001.

"They know he's a black guy from Chicago and he might be a Muslim," Saunders said. "There's suspicion there. But once he comes down there, and he uses that charisma and explains to the culture what he's going to do for them, I think they will accept him."

### **A people in need**

Twice a month, on Thursday mornings, a line forms outside the Bread of Life Community Food Pantry on Main Street in Saltville.

About 40 people are waiting the morning of Aug. 14, more than an hour before volunteers begin to hand out free cardboard boxes filled with fresh produce, cereal, dried beans and canned goods.

One of them is Nikki Harris, a single mother struggling to raise three children -- ages 8, 6 and 3 -- on food stamps, Medicaid and child support. Harris said she'd like to look for a job.

"But by the time you pay for a baby sitter and pay for gas to go to work, you might as well throw away the whole paycheck," she said. "Between the gas prices and the food prices, nobody can make it any more."

The faltering national economy is a key issue in this region, which has long struggled with high unemployment rates and per-capita incomes well below the state average.

When the food bank opened in 1997, there were just five families to feed. Now it serves more than 600 families and 2,000 people, said Raymond Cross, the charity's purchasing and distribution agent.

Harris plans to vote for Obama. "I just think he's more for the people that need," she said.

Other Appalachians living in poverty take a more fatalistic view, figuring there's not much that any president, Democrat or Republican, can do to ease their plight.

Rebecca Flemming, a convenience store clerk who lives in the former coal camp of Trammel, saw no reason to celebrate when the minimum wage went from \$5.85 to \$6.55. "I make 300 bucks, if I'm lucky, every two weeks," Flemming said.

"People will drive by here and say it's a crap hole," Flemming said as she sipped a Bud Light on the front porch of a ramshackle house with peeling paint and a pile of coal in the front yard.

"But I don't go sign up for food stamps; I don't get public assistance. I do it myself. When you look in my kitchen, it's soup beans and it's frozen potatoes. When I buy school clothes for my kids, it's not the best. It's

Wal-Mart."

Flemming scoffs at politicians who say they can empathize with the working poor.

"They can't," she said. "Tell me one who grew up in a house like this."

### **High military service**

On a hillside near Konnarock, which straddles the border of Smyth and Washington counties, a new house is taking shape behind the homestead where four generations of Penningtons grew up.

It's the house that Greg Pennington promised to build for his parents -- before he went off to war four years ago as an Army staff sergeant and was killed by mortar fire in Iraq.

Now, the house that Pennington planned is being built by the Smyth Chapter Fuller Center for Housing, the Marion post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and dozens of volunteers from the community.

"It will always be special," Pennington's father, Aulbin, says as he views the cinder-block foundation from his back porch. "This is what he wanted."

Community support for U.S. troops like that in Konnarock is common throughout far Southwest Virginia, where the scarcity of jobs leads to a high per-capita participation in the military, according to Mooney.

"So there is a long, long tradition of intense patriotism which develops into a kind of pro-military mind-set and an intense, almost desperate desire to see America as being the clear-cut winner of any military conflict the nation engages in," Mooney said.

That sentiment would benefit McCain, whose support for the troop surge in Iraq is bolstered by a strong military background and his storied ordeal as a Vietnam prisoner of war.

"I think it's extremely important how McCain has demonstrated his loyalties, and he's made immense sacrifices," Wise County resident Ben Boggs said. "This is truly important in that we know where his loyalties lie."

### **Old-time religion**

It is time for Wednesday night prayer service at Community Fellowship Baptist Church in Gate City. Parishioner Lynn Miller walks inside with his Bible clutched tightly to his chest.

"He probably has some Muslim background," Miller says when asked about Obama. "He says he's a Christian, so I take him at his word until I see some different actions that tell me to the contrary."

In the Republican stronghold of Scott County, what spooks Miller and many others is all this talk from Obama about change.

"Change comes hard in rural America," said John Sheppard, the pastor at Community Fellowship. "We're probably 25 to 35 years behind the times, culture-wise."

Yet in interviews across the region, few voters mentioned the hot-button issues normally associated with the

religious right, such as the pro-life movement or opposition to gay marriage.

"We've rode those two horses to death: abortion and homosexuality," said Mike Rife, pastor of Vansant Church of Christ in Buchanan County. "I think this year those will be put on the second or third burner, behind the economy and the war."

Religion might still play a role in shaping Southwest Virginian's views on the candidates as individuals -- especially considering the statements by Obama's former minister in Chicago, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, which were seen by many here as anti-American.

"There is just this deep, deep, deeply felt sense of Christianity and America's destiny as a Christian nation," said Mooney, the Appalachian studies expert. "So any perceived sense of a national leader who is not Christian triggers tremendous fear and uncertainty."

## **Battleground**

As motorists pull up to the gas pumps at the Chevron station in Lebanon on a late July afternoon, LeRoy Graefe and Deborah Townsend are waiting, clipboards in hand.

Graefe, a paid Obama staffer who works out of the campaign office in Castlewood, and Townsend, a volunteer, are looking to register voters.

Billy Joe Crawford, a young man who aspires to be a coal miner, agreed to fill out the papers while gassing up his truck.

"Would you like to work for Barack Obama?" Townsend asks.

"Work?" Crawford asks, a bit startled. "What kind of work?"

"It could be anything. Phone calls or anything," Townsend says.

Crawford declines and drives away. Unfazed, Townsend and Graefe wait for the next potential voter, the next possible volunteer, the next chance to do whatever they can to help elect the country's first black president.

It's all part of the Obama plan for Southwest Virginia: enlisting as many grass-roots volunteers as possible and encouraging those "ambassadors" to talk to people in their communities about why they support the Illinois senator.

"That, we think, is the most effective and authentic way to get the senator's message and biography out to skeptical voters: the truth coming from someone they trust," said Griffis, the Obama state spokesman.

While McCain has no campaign office west of Roanoke, a group of Republicans recently met at the home of the Wise County GOP committee chairman to talk about the support he has in the region.

"Regardless of how many headquarters he [Obama] opens, and regardless of where he appears, I think that at the end of the day, when they go into the voting booth, the voters of Southwest Virginia are going to go with the issues, and that will be for McCain and not Obama," said Michelle Jenkins, head of the 9th District Republican Committee.

But on many issues, Mooney points out, "Appalachia is very much, as it has always been, a bundle of contradictions."

What comes from those contradictions won't be clear until Election Day.

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