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[Home](#) / [news](#) / [opinion](#) /

Obama backers face struggle in Appalachian town

By Marsha Mercer Media General News Service

TAZEWELL, Va. -- Appalachia can be a cold country for liberals, so when word came that the Obama campaign was opening an office in town, Dee Crescitelli started driving by, just to see if it was open yet.

When the storefront opened late last month, Dee, a teacher, and her husband, Todd, a lawyer, stopped to get campaign bumper stickers and yard signs.

“I was pleasantly surprised to see people,” she said.

For the first presidential election in four decades, Virginia is in play, a swing state whose 13 electoral votes could be decisive. That possibility has led the Obama campaign to open dozens of offices around the state. The Democrat is expected to draw strong support in the urban centers of Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads.

But the fact that Obama’s 44th and newest campaign office is in a small strip shopping center in this town of 4,200 in a county of about 44,000 testifies to Barack Obama’s hope that he can blunt Republican John McCain’s appeal in Southwest Virginia.

Reaching even that modest goal may be difficult. Tazewell County twice gave George W. Bush double-digit leads on Election Day and in 2006 favored Republican George Allen for Senate over Democrat Jim Webb. And then there’s the racial and cultural divide.

“A lot of people are looking for any excuse they can find not to vote for Barack,” Dee Crescitelli said. “They don’t want race to be the reason. They know that’s wrong. So they say he’s not going to understand us. He’s too foreign.”

Polls show Obama taking the lead in national polls and in several battleground states, including Virginia. So, while the country as a whole may be ready for a black president, many people here say this insulated area isn’t ready.

The county is 96 percent white and the average per capita income in 2000 was \$22,269, well below the state and national average.

“There’s an underlying racial bias,” said Mike Harris, who retired earlier this year after 25 years as an agriculture extension agent. “We’re culturally homogenous. There’s no cultural diversity here at all.”

With race generally off the table, the arguments against Obama center on guns and his perceived elitism, an “otherness” that sets him apart. If Sarah Palin, McCain’s running mate, is “one of us,” as her supporters like to say, then Obama is “one of them,” whoever they are.

Most who steer their pickup trucks into the shopping center parking lot are headed for the Sportsman’s Den, which is doing a brisk business in hunting licenses. I checked in to see what people were saying about the presidential race, but the woman minding the store didn’t want to talk politics. She told me she’s sure God will give us the president we should have.

Up the way, Jim Congrove, owner of Gold-n-Oldies Music and Memories shop, said anyone who votes for Obama is unpatriotic. Others told me they believe a President Obama would take away their civil liberties and guns.

The McCain campaign office is in the Tobacco Barn, a shop that sells not only tobacco products but has tanning booths and provides shipping services. Owner Will Morefield, 24, is the local GOP precinct chairman.

Morefield said recent comments by Obama running mate Joe Biden disparaging coal-powered electrical plants hurt the Democrats in coal-producing Southwest Virginia. The comments, caught on video, have been running on YouTube, and McCain used the remarks in ads.

“I hear about it 20 times a day,” Morefield said. A man in a McCain-Palin sweatshirt came in for campaign signs but Morefield had run out.

On the night of the first presidential debate, Dee and Todd Crescitelli and their daughter, Madeline, 7, went to a debate-watching party sponsored by the Obama campaign. It was less a party than a gathering of about eight like-minded souls in the bar at El Mariachi, a restaurant in

the same shopping center as the Obama office. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

The café's manager, Jose Rizo, said he supports Obama, but, "I'm about the only one here who does."

A citizen since 1994, Rizo hasn't cared about voting until now. Unfortunately for Obama, though, Rizo lives in West Virginia, where McCain is heavily favored.

— What do you think? Comment at mgwashington.com or e-mail mmercerc@mediageneral.com.

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