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He looks like a terrorist but I'll

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Fears about the economy are overcoming racial prejudice even in rural areas of the crucial state of Ohio, **Tim Reid** writes from Waverly

As a beautiful dawn breaks over the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, lighting up the tiny Ohio town of Waverly -where black people were once not allowed to live -David Risner stands puffing on a hand-rolled cigarette, one hand thrust into his camouflage hunting jacket.

"I ain't gonna lie to you," he said. "A lot of people around here don't want Obama because of his colour. And it's his name that bothers me. It's Muslim."

The 44-year-old truck driver took a sip of coffee and added: "Despite all that, I'm pushing more toward him because of the economy. Fuel prices are killing us. To me, McCain is just for the rich people. A lot of us are reconsidering Obama because we like what he's saying on the economy."

A hundred yards away Michelle Cantrell, 23, was smoking a cigarette outside a drug recovery centre, where she is being treated for addiction to painkillers. A year ago, she said, she would never have voted for Barack Obama "because he looks foreign and he looks like a terrorist". She said that some of her friends believe he is the Antichrist.

And now? "I'm probably gonna vote for Obama. He'll bring us jobs and health care."

Waverly is in the heart of rural, southern Ohio, an area dominated by gun owning, culturally conservative, working-class white people who, in past presidential races, have held the balance of power in this critical swing state that could determine who wins the White House on November 4.

Many were blunt about their attitude to black people: they did not care for them. They did not trust them. In the Democratic primary Pike County, where Waverly is the biggest town, 72per cent backed Hillary Clinton, part of the trend in which white Appalachians in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky defiantly turned their backs on Mr Obama.

Waverly was once a "sunset town", a community that actively excluded blacks. In 1875 it had 1,279 inhabitants -all of them white. Today it is still 97per cent white. Unlike the Deep South, where the question of race and politics has been a daily issue for decades, voters in Appalachia have rarely been confronted with an African-American candidate -let alone been asked to put one in the White House.

Yet something is happening, courtesy of the economic crisis that has boosted the fortunes of Mr Obama across the country. A growing number of people in southern Ohio are considering something that they dismissed only a few months ago: voting for a black man. For some, fears about the economy are trumping racial prejudice.

Danny Conley runs a ramshackle discount shop that sells candles, US flags, baseball caps and second-hand carpets. He is 44, but looks 60. When he was asked who he planned to vote for on November 4, he looked down at the ground before answering.

"I have been thinking about that the last few days, with all that's going on," he sighed. "I wanted Hillary. Then I was thinking about McCain but I think I'll probably go with Obama. I think he'd probably do a good job. The economy's all anyone is talking about." Mr Conley insisted that he was not a racist -"I always got along with blacks" -but said that a lot of his friends and neighbours had a problem with Obama because he's black.

" But they're reconsidering. There's a lot of stress here. People are hurting. Times are tough. Obama understands. He is more on our side. I just want to see the economy get straightened out."

Ted Strickland, the (white) Democratic Governor of Ohio, who grew up in these parts, has been blunt about the race issue. He said that Mr Obama would be running away with the presidential contest were it not for his skin colour.

He has been telling voters in recent weeks that race is "the elephant in the room".

"We need to talk about it," he told 40 farmers, factory workers and older people in nearby Georgetown. "Where I grew up, everybody looked like me," Mr Strickland told them. "We need to acknowledge the fact that this is a new experience. And we need to move beyond it." He recalled a recent conversation with Ed Rendell, the Pennsylvania Governor, who has been telling Appalachian voters in his state: "If you were drowning in a river, would you care about the colour of the hand that is reaching out to save you? No, you would not. And in this economy many people are drowning."

Tim Hagan, a county commissioner in southern Ohio, said: "Many people who have no real relationship with African-Americans have a real problem with race. But will the economy trump race for some of those? Absolutely. But there are still many who will never vote for him because of the colour of his skin."

In the Cross Keys Tavern in Chillicote, 20 miles north of Waverly, Tom Burke, the owner, said: "I have the Bubba types here. Some are overcoming their prejudices. There is a pervading sense that the economy is not the only staggering disaster -and the Republicans are the incumbent party."

Many Democrats have been quietly wringing their hands over Mr Obama's skin colour and believe that it is the reason he failed to open up an insurmountable gap over Mr McCain in the most favourable political climate for a Democrat in a generation.

Some also fretted about the "Bradley Effect", a disputed phenomenon first written about after the 1982 California governor race when Tom Bradley, a black candidate, led in pre-election polls yet lost to his white opponent. Since then there have been questions about whether voters told the truth to canvassers when a black candidate was involved because they did not want to appear bigoted -but ended up backing the white contender. One recent and highly controversial poll estimated the Bradley effect this year at 6 per cent.

Aides to Mr Obama called such concerns absurd. During the Democratic primary Mr Obama failed to match the polls in only three contests and did better than predicted in 12 others.

In Waverly some people had no qualms about appearing bigoted. Outside Wal Mart, Carrie Hunt, 64, said that she thought Mr Obama was better on the issues. So was she going to vote for him? "Hell no! I just don't like him. Black people think we all owe them something."

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