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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

POLITICS | OCTOBER 25, 2008

Obama Intensifies Effort in Appalachia

By AMY CHOZICK

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- With national and battleground-state polls giving Barack Obama a healthy lead, his campaign is redoubling efforts in Appalachia, the scene of several primary-season defeats, to see if it can finally win over the region's white, working-class voters.



Associated Press

Democratic vice-presidential nominee Joe Biden addresses a campaign rally in downtown Charleston, W. Va., on Friday.

Democratic vice-presidential nominee Joe Biden on Friday talked about plans to create jobs and cut middle-class taxes, at a rally in Charleston, W.V., his first campaign visit to the Mountain State. "We estimate [the plan] will create 12,000 jobs here in West Virginia alone," Sen. Biden told the crowd of roughly 3,000.

Earlier this month, the Obama campaign began airing its first statewide advertisements in West Virginia, where Republican nominee John McCain has been leading in recent polls. A new TV ad called "Defend," airing throughout Appalachia, where gun rights are a big concern, touts Sen. Obama's pledge to uphold the Second Amendment.

Appalachia includes a wide swath of rural, mostly white, low-income communities stretching into key battleground states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia. George W. Bush won the area in 2000 and 2004, and Sen. Hillary Clinton handily beat Sen. Obama there in the primaries. But mounting voter concerns about the economy and the Illinois Democrat's growing lead in many polls are encouraging him to intensify his efforts in the region.

"We wouldn't be investing there if we didn't see a pathway to victory," said Obama campaign manager David

Plouffe.

There was a time when voters in Appalachia, driven by economic concerns, were reliably Democratic. But in recent presidential elections, they have responded to Republican appeals on social issues like gun rights and opposition to abortion.

The McCain campaign says appealing to social issues will work again in 2008. Sen. McCain and his running mate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, an antiabortion advocate and hunting enthusiast, can better relate to the conservative voters in the region than "the most liberal senator in America," said campaign spokesman Tucker Bounds.

"I love 'Small Town USA' because hard-working, good American [families], you guys, you just get it," Gov. Palin said last week at a rally in St. Clairsville, Ohio, a small town near West Virginia. She added that Sen. Obama doesn't understand rural communities.

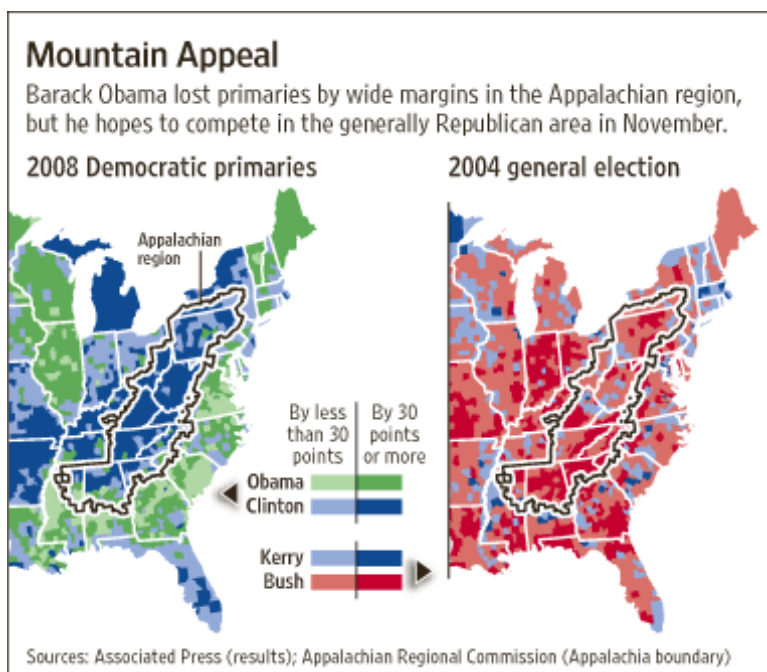
Tim McGhee, a 52-year-old technical analyst in Charleston, has voted Republican in the past but said Sen. Obama's response to the financial crisis has persuaded him to support the Democrat. "He's articulating his plans on the economy a lot better than McCain," Mr. McGhee said. "We just need something different."

Both candidates hope to win over the region's voters to help deliver victories in swing states. A Quinnipiac University poll released on Thursday gives Sen. Obama a 52%-38% lead against Sen. McCain in Ohio, compared with a 50%-42% lead on Oct. 1.

In Pennsylvania, the Democrat leads 53%-40% despite a big push recently by Sen. McCain in the state. Sen. Obama had a 15-point lead there in early October.

But the Obama campaign is acutely aware of the region's remaining challenges.

"These areas have always been more resistant to Sen. Obama than many other places," said Peter Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute.



Dan Harper, a 60-year-old sales associate in Charleston, said he plans to vote for Sen. McCain because he isn't sure if Sen. Obama shares his values. "I know McCain is a good Christian, but I'm not so sure about Obama."

Martha Mills, a 37-year-old paralegal in Charleston, said she voted early for Sen. Obama but doubts West Virginia will elect an African-American. "I've pretty much lost all hope that he can win here," Ms. Mills said.

On a recent afternoon at the Obama campaign's Charleston headquarters, volunteers called voters to push Sen. Obama's health-care and tax plans and explain that he is God-loving family man.

The office offered fliers titled "His Story Is Our Story" that show Sen. Obama shaking hands with two older, white women.

During the Democratic primaries, the Appalachian region heavily favored Sen. Clinton. She defeated Sen. Obama by roughly 10 percentage points in Ohio and Pennsylvania. She won the West Virginia primary 67%-26%.

A survey conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling and Research Inc. Oct. 16-17 gives Sen. McCain a 47%-41% lead over Sen. Obama in West Virginia, with a four-point margin of error. Polls showed that Sen. McCain had a double-digit lead shortly after he clinched the Republican nomination in March. Mr. Plouffe said the Obama campaign's internal polls show an even-tighter race in that state.

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A4

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