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Can Obama win Appalachia?

BYLINE: Linda B. Blackford, Lexington Herald-Leader

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It's hard to imagine now, says Charlie Peters, but back in 1960, the Catholicism of John F. Kennedy was every bit as big a problem for Appalachian voters as Barack Obama's race appears to be today.

When Peters, Kennedy's Kanawha County campaign chairman, first took him around Charleston, W.Va, at least 20 percent of the people refused to shake his hand. So Kennedy spent 16 of the 30 days before the primary showing West Virginians "he wasn't wearing the Pope's clothes," Peters said.

The campaign brought in Franklin Delano Roosevelt Jr., distributed 40,000 copies of a Reader's Digest story about Kennedy's heroism in World War II and spread around plenty of money. Kennedy won the primary, which helped propel him to the nomination.

The Obama campaign chose a different route - a smattering of TV commercials and fliers about his Christian faith, but just one visit by the candidate to Kentucky and West Virginia this year. There was little direct conversation about voters' misconceptions of his religion, or about concerns related to divisive remarks by his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

He lost to Hillary Clinton in both states by more than 30 points.

The question now is whether Obama, as the expected nominee, will continue writing off Appalachia or return and try to make his case to white, rural voters.

"I worry about them gliding past a problem like that," said Peters, who went on to found the Washington Monthly magazine and is now an Obama supporter. "There are people like this all over the country, and if you don't reach out, they would have stayed in West Virginia thinking Jack would have done what the Pope said, just like now they'll think Obama will do what Rev. Wright says. It calls for dramatic action."

Race and rumors

Polling before and after Kentucky's May 20 primary showed that Obama's race was a big issue for voters in Kentucky. More than one of five said it would make him less electable in a Herald-Leader/WKYT Election Poll, while an exit poll by the Associated Press found a similar response. Of those, only a third said they'd vote for Obama in a general election. Nearly half of white voters said Wright's

comments were important or very important to them.

The race issue is complicated by false, but rampant, rumors that Obama is Muslim. In Leslie County, a Republican county where Obama won 5 percent of the Democratic vote, the county judge-executive doesn't hesitate before mischaracterizing Obama's religion.

"I think one of the big problems for him is he's Muslim," said Jimmy Sizemore, the highest elected official in the county. "It's his religion, plus when his pastor came out and started talking, that was a problem, but that's just my opinion.

"I don't think it's because he's black; what everybody says is he is a Muslim."

When asked if he had ever researched the fact that Obama - and the Rev. Wright - are Christians, Sizemore said: "I don't care about finding out because I'm a Republican."

Over in Pike County, former Gov. Paul Patton said he doesn't doubt that Obama's race played some part in his loss, adding that it's "absurd and unfortunate" any elected official would perpetuate the rumor that Obama is Muslim.

But "a great extent of Hillary's victory had to do with Bill Clinton's popularity here," Patton said. Bill Clinton visited the state eight times before, during and after his presidency; he carried the state in both elections and blanketed the state before the primary.

"There's as much his and her personal popularity involved as there is some latent racism," said Patton. "Racism is in every state, but it balances out in many states because they have a lot more African-Americans."

Patton said that if Obama is the nominee, his campaign will make sophisticated calculations about the 10 or 12 swing states they could possibly win in the fall. As Patton points out, Al Gore wrote off Kentucky and West Virginia in 2000, both of which he lost, along with his home state of Tennessee.

Still, even without spending a lot of resources, Rep. Greg Stumbo, D-Prestonsburg, thinks it would be wise for Obama to campaign in Eastern Kentucky.

"He could say, 'I'm one of you, I've been looked down upon because of my color and we've got to overcome these stereotypes.' I think that would sell pretty well up here.

"People want to hear him say things, like 'I'm not a Muslim, I'm not part of this sect that hates America.'"

Jennifer Moore, chair of the Kentucky Democratic Party, believes Clinton's huge margins in Eastern Kentucky are related to Obama's decision not to campaign there.

Eastern Kentucky is accustomed to national attention from presidents and presidential hopefuls, including John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Bill Clinton, John Edwards and John McCain.

"When he does that they're going to have the same respect and admiration for him that they do for Hillary Clinton," Moore said, adding that Obama and Clinton have similar positions on most key issues. "Once they hear that directly from him, they're going to support him like they're supporting Hillary Clinton."

Moore said Kentucky should be on the national Democrats' radar because it, like many other states, saw a surge in new Democratic voters - about 13,000 of 16,000 voters registered since November. The state also has picked the winning president every year since 1964.

'Tortured siblings'

Last week, U.S. Sen. Jim Webb, D-Virginia, who has been mentioned as a possible vice-presidential candidate to Obama, made the point that the traditional Scots-Irish culture of Appalachia should be more of an ally than an enemy of the African-American community.

"Black America and Scots-Irish America are like tortured siblings - they both have a long history and they both missed the boat when it came to the larger benefits that other people received," he told MSNBC. "If this cultural group could get at the same table as black America, you could rechange populist American politics because they have so much in common in terms of what they need out of government."

Pineville lawyer and former state representative Steve Cawood remembers the enthusiastic welcome that the Rev. Jesse Jackson got in Hazard in 1988, where nearly 4,000 people gathered to cheer his talk of ending poverty.

"I'm not going to sit here and tell you there isn't bigotry here, but familiarity can overcome that kind of thing," he said.

Obama should listen to that point of view, rather than accept the conventional wisdom that he'll never get support in rural, white America, said professional pollster Del Ali of Research 2000 in Maryland. "It would be smart of him to visit, to go to Appalachia and say, 'What I'm offering is closer to your interests ... you've got nothing in common with trickle-down economics or oil companies; I care about you,'" Ali said. "I'm surprised he didn't do more of that before the primary."

That approach could be particularly important in West Virginia, which has a stronger Democratic base, Ali said. "He has to top 40 percent of the white votes in Kentucky and I don't think there's any way to do that," he said, adding that even in more liberal Wisconsin, Obama received only 42 percent of the white vote.

Clinton's strong base

In Magoffin County, the whitest county in the nation at 98.9 percent, Clinton won with 93 percent of the vote, her largest margin in Kentucky.

County Judge-Executive Charles Hardin said the result was more pro-Clinton than anti-Obama. But he thinks the falling popularity of the Republican Party means any Democratic candidate can prevail in the fall.

Luke Lewis of Salyersville, Magoffin's county seat, suggests that Obama "needs to come here and say 'I'm not a Muslim, and if I'm elected president, I'm not going to give up on you.'"

"Working people have the weight of the world on their shoulders; we're as oppressed as anyone," Lewis added. "If you want my vote, make a play for it. Let me know you're interested in me."

That's what Kennedy did more than 40 years ago, says Charlie Peters, and he was able to erase long-held prejudices in Appalachia and across the United States. He just hopes it's not too late for the Obama campaign, since attitudes in Appalachia are hardly confined to that region.

"They still have to try because these people exist all over the country " he said. "I just think they [the Obama campaign] didn't realize how hard they had to fight back. It's got to be a multi-pronged attack."

Reporter Ryan Alessi and researcher Linda Niemi contributed to this report, reprinted with permission from the Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader.

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