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Battle shaping up over Appalachia

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The acronym for What would John F. Kennedy do is emerging as the answer of choice from political observers on how Democratic presidential contender Sen. Barack Obama can make inroads with blue-collar voters across Appalachia, where he spent little time during the primary election, conceding that it was all but a lost cause.

Now that he's the presumed nominee, some argue that Mr. Obama needs to take a page from the political playbook of Mr. Kennedy, another Ivy League outsider who showed up in the Mountain State of West Virginia, looked coal miners and steelworkers in the eye and invested in their concerns. Even though he was different, he made an effort, and it paid off.

"People said he's rich, he's doesn't sound like us ... but he respected them and won them over," said Ron Stockton, a political science professor at the University of Michigan at Dearborn of Mr. Kennedy's political prowess in the Bubba belt, where Mr. Obama's God and guns quip remains a sour point for the deer-hunting, churchgoing faithful.

The lingering animosity and any lost ground of the past must be "neutralized," said Mr. Stockton, who argues that Mr. Obama has an opportunity to win in Appalachia, an increasingly key region.



"It caters to the suspicions of Scots-Irish people that outsiders are laughing at them," Mr. Stockton said of the cultural slight. "He's got to make it clear that he respects people," and renewing his investment to the region might help.

How important is the vote in Appalachia, which comprises parts of 13 states from New York to the Carolinas, and its oft-marginalized voters?

"I think the rural vote overall will decide who is president," says Dave "Mudcat" Saunders, a Democratic strategist who led efforts for the John Edwards campaign to attract the rural voting block.

Mr. Saunders, a hunting- and fishing-loving poster child for the backwoods and defender of Southern culture, lives in a rural area outside of Roanoke and is adamant that Mr. Obama needs to get himself back to the hills, hollers and farmland - places in which Sen. John McCain, waving the flag of patriotism that is also held high among rural types, certainly will invest as the general election moves forward.

If Mr. Obama wants to win here, he needs to return as the nominee and show them they matter, observers say.

"To paraphrase Earl Long, rednecks are human beings, too," the folksy Mr. Saunders says. "I think the election will be won or lost out here. If you look at the swing votes now, the majority of them are not in urban or suburban America; they are in third-tier markets, places like rural Michigan that people forget about. Those are the people who haven't decided."

Undecided voters are key as polls show a close contest. According to the recent Rasmussen Reports surveys, Mr. Obama leads Mr. McCain by about 5 percent.

In rural areas, Mr. McCain has held an advantage. A poll taken May 18 by the Center for Rural Strategies in Kentucky found the Arizona senator leading Mr. Obama by nine points among rural voters in battleground states. However, the survey of rural voters in 13 states also found that both candidates had opportunities to gain ground on key issues. Mr. Obama, for example, bested Mr. McCain by eight points on the economy while Mr. McCain led his opponent on the Iraq war by three points and held a nine-point lead on shared values. Mr. Obama and Mr. McCain tied with voters when asked who would do a better job on rural issues.

Sensing an opening and also a mounting contest, West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin has become increasingly adamant that Mr. Obama visit his state again, where the Illinois senator lost by a wide margin to Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton in the primary.

The Democratic governor's spokeswoman Lara Ramsburg argues that because West Virginia is a state where Democrats outnumber Republicans 2-1, there remains an opportunity for Mr. Obama, even though he essentially was trounced there and in neighboring Kentucky by Mrs. Clinton in the primary election.

"The governor believes that the reason many West Virginians supported Mrs. Clinton is because they are familiar with her and her husband. They have been here many times," she said. "People in West Virginia, we like to have a comfort level with people - shake your hand, look you in the eye and know you mean what you say. The governor believes that if Mr. Obama spends some time here, he has a chance to get people to have that same comfort level with him."

Miss Ramsburg says Mr. Manchin thinks West Virginia is a real test market for other areas, such as Ohio and Pennsylvania, that share the same demographics. Doing well in West Virginia could show voters nearby that, indeed, Mr. Obama is capable of winning their hearts and minds - and is willing to make a renewed investment to do so.

While some have argued that patriotism is key - West Virginia boasts the largest number of veterans and lost the most soldiers of any state during the Vietnam War - others argue that rural voters care about the same issues that others do. For that reason alone, there remains untapped potential there and in other Appalachian states, Miss Ramsburg says.

"We are still one of the most patriotic states, but that doesn't mean that we don't acknowledge that there are issues and problems. For that reason, people here are giving a second look to Sen. Obama," she said. "Regardless of who they have supported in the primary, they know we just can't sustain another eight years, another two terms like we've just had. People here don't want that, and the country just can't afford for that to happen."

Gary Abernathy, a Charleston, W.Va.-based Republican strategist, says that, indeed, West Virginia should be a swing state with its heavy Democratic support but also says Mr. Obama "has his work cut out for him" in resonating with rural voters, not only in

West Virginia but in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

"Obviously it's a tough sell when they look at how they performed against Hillary in the primary," he said. "The McCain campaign is not taking it for granted."

Just last week, Mr. McCain announced a full-time state director in an effort to organize more fully and turn West Virginia - which went to President Bush in 2000 and 2004 - into a red state once again.

"He wants West Virginia, and obviously, he's not taking anything for granted. He's putting paid staff in here. He's here to fight for it. I don't believe the Obama campaign has done the same thing."