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# The Washington Times

## Obama shifts spectrum in 3 red states

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FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. | Her family moved south for more affordable living, but can barely pay for health care.

She does not want to see her husband off to another Iraq deployment.

He's more excited about this election than any other, and never thought he'd see a black president in his lifetime.

These voters - hailing from North Carolina and Virginia, two rock-solid Republican "red states" in presidential races for decades, and West Virginia, which twice supported President Bush - are the kinds of voters who are bolstering Democratic presidential nominee Sen. Barack Obama.

The Washington Times logged 1,300 miles through the mountains and valleys of these three states that can swing the outcome of the election, finding similar sentiments among this disparate group of voters in states that were thought to be safe for Mr. McCain a few months ago.

In all three states, in every demographic, including Republicans, voters say they are frustrated with the past eight years and view Mr. Obama as a symbol of hope in a time of war and economic hardship. If they show up at the polls and vote accordingly, they likely will deliver the White House for Mr. Obama on Election Day.



Tapping into the motivations of thousands at an Obama rally in Roanoke, a local pastor reciting the opening benediction offered a prayer for those "struggling with health care," and "families who have lost children to the war."

"We thank you for leaders like Barack Obama and Joe Biden," he said, adding that the Democratic ticket can "reach out for those needing a helping hand at this time and lead us to a period of renewed hope and inspiration."

That's exactly what Obama voters in these states are seeking.

"I know it's become a catchphrase, 'hope and change,' but when you are trying to pay your bills, what is wrong with hope? Hope provides motivation. Hope matters," said Ross Brickman, 38, of Greensboro, N.C.

Mr. Brickman and his significant other, Sheryl Meier, 33, are part of the migration from more liberal parts of the country that also is transforming the electorate. They moved from Minnesota to buy a more affordable home, even though her job doing quality control in the medical industry is paying her less.

They are voting for Mr. Obama because they believe he understands their middle-class struggle, citing the Obama family's student loans they were still paying off at the beginning of the decade.

Mr. Brickman has a heart problem and is on disability, and said if they get married, his medical bills would bankrupt their family.

"That shouldn't happen," Miss Meier said.

### *Time for a change*

Military voters, who favored President Bush in 2004, have overwhelmingly been making donations to the Obama campaign over Mr. McCain, a decorated Vietnam veteran. The Democratic ticket has made frequent visits to the pockets of Virginia and North Carolina that boast big populations of military families.

Dozens of troops and their children waited to catch a glimpse of Mr. Obama at a recent rally in Fayetteville, home of Fort Bragg.

Godfred Mensah, 31, is in the Army and has been to Iraq three times and Afghanistan twice. Hours before the nominee took the stage, he and his 8-year-old son waited in line and promised that if Mr. Obama is elected, the military community would "rally behind our president."

"The past eight years have been very demanding," he said. "Obama is going to support the change we've all be praying for. Everyone has been struggling and we're looking for something better for our family."

Jose Cordero, 28, is serving in the Army and stationed at Fort Bragg. He will be returning to Iraq for a second tour sometime next year.

Holding their 1-year-old daughter, Genevieve, on his shoulders in the long line for the rally, Mr. Cordero shrugged.

"Whatever president there is, I'm working for them. But I'd rather see something new," he said.

Diane Cordero was more direct, saying she doesn't want her husband to go back.

"If Obama is trying to take us out of Iraq, that's good. McCain is just trying to finish off what President Bush couldn't do," she said.

Conne Pirner's 24-year-old son has fulfilled his commitment to the Army, but she fears he'll have to serve again.

"I have a child with diabetes and I have a son who did two tours in Iraq. And I just feel like President Bush, with his policies, has tried to kill both of my kids," said Mrs. Pirner, a teacher in Barrackville, W.Va. "If we get a Democrat in the White House, he won't be called back."

*\*\* To read more about the political mindset in Barrackville and view video, read Hard times in Barrackville are hurting McCain \*\**

### *Economic woes*

The economies of West Virginia, North Carolina and Virginia have been hit particularly hard for years as jobs were shipped overseas. They have seen record

unemployment, and young families that moved there from more expensive parts of the Northeast are seeing their health care costs skyrocket. Voters said they blame the Bush administration for financial problems and that they believe Mr. McCain would continue Republican economic policies.

When Mr. Bush took office, 80,000 people were out of work in Virginia. Now, more than 180,000 are seeking jobs.

Health care was a dominant complaint from the voters, several of whom cited opposition to the McCain health care plan in language similar to the Obama attack ads that have been flooding the airwaves in battleground states.

Sara Sharp of Blacksburg, Va., said the \$700 monthly health insurance premiums and doctor visit and prescription co-payments make it difficult for her family to get by while she stays home with 14-month-old son Jonah.

"I am voting for somebody who is really going to change the system, not just give you \$5,000," she said, referring to Mr. McCain's plan to give people a tax rebate. "All of these young families I know, we're all struggling."

D.J. Waters, 30, a mother of two from Pinehurst, N.C., said her family would get a tax cut under an Obama administration.

"Given the war and the economy, it's just time for something new," she said. "It's just been a horrible time for this whole nation. People are just waking up to that."

In each interview, one theme surfaced again and again.

"People want change," said Robert Fanucci, a food-service worker at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. "I pay more for gas while Republicans are in office. The only health care I have is if I was hit by a truck, I'd need to declare bankruptcy."

The 31-year-old worker, who registered to vote so he could back Democrat Jim Webb for Senate in 2006, is one of those Generation X-ers who have never been polled, and he hasn't participated in enough elections to make it through most poll screens. But he's voting for Mr. Obama, and he has persuaded his 75-year-old Republican father to do the same.

## *Republican 'Obamacans'*

Mr. Obama holds a significant lead in Virginia and a slight lead in North Carolina, and is within striking distance in West Virginia, the most Democratic of these three battlegrounds.

Team Obama has a larger and more enthusiastic get-out-the-vote operation, and is taking advantage of the demographic shifts from urban migration, energized black voters who want to make history and a sagging economy that has left many Republican-leaning voters reconsidering the party.

Virginia last voted for a Democrat for president in 1964 and was once considered so reliably red that Republicans didn't bother to campaign there. But Democrats won the governorship in 2005 and a Senate seat in 2006 as the Washington suburbs get an influx of families from other parts of the nation and as the state party cashes in on a politically engaged and growing group of young voters.

North Carolina last favored a Democrat for president when it backed Southerner Jimmy Carter in 1976. It was considered a long shot when the Obama campaign decided to pour resources into the state, but now is leaning Democratic in both the presidential and Senate races after Mr. Obama has made repeated visits.

In West Virginia, Democrats outnumber Republicans, but the Republican Party won in both 2000 and 2004 using social issues. Mr. Obama lost the primary by 41 points to Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton in May, and did not invest many resources to try to flip the state.

Now, that is changing. The campaign opened an office on Monday in New Martinsville, sent vice-presidential nominee Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. to Charleston on Friday and has recently directed some of its television budget into West Virginia.

The change in these states is not just from Democrats. Many Republicans said they are fed up with the Bush era and seeking something new.

In 2000, lifelong Republican Carolyn K. Sterns was disgusted with George W. Bush's campaign against Mr. McCain, so she wrote in the name of the senator from Arizona and did the same in 2004 rather than vote for her party's incumbent president. Now, the 69-year-old native of Sistersville, W.Va., has traveled from South Carolina to

Texas to Pennsylvania on behalf of Mr. Obama.

She said she used to like Mr. McCain as an independent voice who deplored Mr. Bush's primary tactics and the 2004 Republican-funded Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ads, but "McCain just started to really change, and now he's hired all those same people."

Ms. Sterns, who ran the Sistersville headquarters for Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, said she sees more of her fellow Republicans "slowly being infuriated."

"The last six years, especially everything the Bush administration has done, is so contrary to what I've always believed. Incompetence has reigned all the way through," she said.

She isn't alone.

Greensboro's Mr. Brickman was hoping Mr. Biden would win the Democratic primary in 1988, but when he didn't, voted for George H.W. Bush.

He said he took a close look at Mr. McCain in 2000 and thought he might consider voting Republican again. "I liked him, but that was eight years ago, and the person that I paid attention to, it's not that guy anymore," he said.

Other voters said Mr. Obama is the answer to the Bush administration's eight years.

"If you go from a Republican to a Republican, we are going to go into a recession," said James Gore, a convenience store worker in West Virginia. "I don't mind Bush, but why didn't we finish one war before we went into another war? You basically killed the economy, you spent a lot of money and now the people's hurting."

Mr. Gore, father to an 11-year-old and recently widowed when his wife died of colon cancer, has no health care.

"We need someone in there different, and you know McCain has got too much Republican connections," he said.

*Making history*

Black voters in North Carolina four years ago made up about 20 percent of the electorate, but already have reached new milestones, representing more than 30 percent of the early voters so far in a surge that is reflecting across the nation. In Georgia and Florida, black voters are showing up in record numbers, in some cases having more people at the polls than responded to the 2000 census.

The Obama campaign is organizing in and targeting predominantly black regions and asking supporters to vote early.

"The fierce urgency is now, it's now Fayetteville," an Obama organizer told 10,000 people gathered before a rally, quoting Martin Luther King. "Get out and vote today. If you are going to be angry at the world, be angry with an objective. After you finish voting today, come down to headquarters. We need you to get out and knock on doors."

Frederick L. Scott, a recovering crack addict and alcoholic, ignored a sunburn as he waited two hours in line the first day of early voting in North Carolina, joining the nearly 500,000 people who did so that week. He also is volunteering for the campaign. The black man, a Vietnam veteran, said he's seen his share of racism but thinks Mr. Obama will win.

"People aren't concerned about color. We're not black and white; we're green," he said.

Joining him on a Friday afternoon in Brother Archie's Barber Shop in High Point was Rodney Sellers, 45. He wasn't so sure the nation will be ready for a black president, but is trying to teach his sons the importance of voting.

"This is the South. White people are Republicans. A lot of people in this area are going to vote for McCain because of their ignorance," said Mr. Sellers, a machine operator at a laminate-flooring company.

His experience growing up in newly desegregated North Carolina was "totally different" from his sons' childhood.

"I thought maybe we'd see a black president in his lifetime, not mine," he said, gesturing to his 10-year-old son, Dylan, as 13-year-old Donnie got his hair cut.

"I didn't think anyone would be able to go through the scrutiny and make it," he said.

Mr. Sellers said his parents, 65 and 70, are "just tickled" about the idea of an Obama presidency.

"I have to remind them he's still a politician. I tell them, 'Voice your disagreement. Don't be silent if he does something wrong just because he's black,' " he said.

Charlie W. Williams, 78, was one of the first black paratroopers and earned three Purple Hearts serving the country in Korea and Vietnam.

"We had a tough time but it has changed," said Mr. Williams, of Raeford, N.C. "I tell a lot of African-Americans, don't think you're the only one who put him there. He's going to get a lot of white votes. And if he don't make it, he still tried."

But Maybel Williams, an Obama supporter from Fayetteville, said she wished more white faces had been in the crowd at his rally.

"I worried there was more pepper than salt," she said. "White folks have to stand up and be counted and not just sneak out the back door."

White voters interviewed for this story were more likely to say that racism won't matter on Election Day.

"People are putting their own interests ahead of their preconceived notions," said Scott Cundiff, 58, of Wheeling, W.Va. "Obama is an extraordinary candidate for working people and has a lot in common with them."

But there are less-harmonious signs.

A campaign office phone banker in West Virginia was flustered Monday by the response at the other end of the line. "Well, I'm sorry you feel that way," she said. After hanging up, she whispered to the volunteer next to her, "Idiot."

A dead bear was found with Obama signs stapled around its head on the campus at Western Carolina University. The college students responsible said it was a prank, not a threat. But each state has seen signs defaced and Confederate flags flying in yards along with anti-Obama messages.



When Mr. Obama stopped at Cape Fear BBQ and Chicken in Fayetteville before his rally, a 54-year-old customer yelled, "Socialist, get out of here," and declined to shake the hand of the senator from Illinois.

A clerk working hours later told a reporter that the Obama visit "ran away some of my regular customers."

The Washington Times captured on video some McCain supporters heckling a group in line to vote early after Mr. Obama's rally in Fayetteville.

The protesters called the voters "cheaters" since the local elections officials opened the site on a Sunday to accommodate demand from the rally. Some shouted the word "terrorist" and taunted Mr. Obama's acknowledged drug use.

"Those people didn't discourage me," said Karen Boone, a Fayetteville social worker who cast her vote for Mr. Obama. "He has a vision for the future and will bring the type of change we need. It's been a rough eight years."