

PHOTOS BY NIKKI KAHN/THE WASHINGTON POST

At top left, supporters listen to President Obama speak Thursday during a campaign stop in Dayton. At top right, a boy waits for Obama to arrive in Cleveland Burke Lakefront Airport that same day. Above, Obama acknowledges the crowd in Dayton. Obama's campaign said the president has been to Ohio on seven different days since the conventions, holding 10 events.

dents rides to poll sites to vote early.

Corissa Marie Spence, a freshman from Dayton, is one of 15 Organizing for America interns on campus working to round up early votes for Obama. She said early voting is important, so students "can't make up excuses" not to vote when Election Day rolls around.

At Romney's campaign office, three doors from the Obama headquarters, volunteers returned from an afternoon of canvassing and were making calls to potential supporters.

"Can Mitt Romney count on your support this year?" one girl asked a voter on the other end of the line. She winced and turned to the volunteer next to her. "She's yelling at me!"

Murl Edwards lives along Route 50, the winding road between Athens and Chillicothe. A McCain voter in 2008, he decided only recently to support Romney. The reason? Coal.

"The past four years have been about the roughest we've had," said Edwards, a 62-year-old retired asphalt and concrete sales representative. Romney's position on coal, he said, "will hopefully get everybody back to work."

For some Romney supporters, there is a foreboding about the future of the country if Obama is reelected. "I've never been more emotionally involved ever in my life in an election," said one man who had just cast an early vote for Romney in Delaware County. "It's physically upsetting. He's [Obama] a well-meaning idealist who's screwing up the country."

He declined to give his name before heading out into the rain and cold.

The Ohio strategy

The battle for Ohio began long before Romney won the GOP nomination. As he was fending off one opponent after another and narrowly winning the primary here in March, the Obama campaign was at work building its infrastructure and shaping its message around the auto bailout.

There is at least some auto industry presence in 80 of the 88 counties, though half the jobs are in just 10 of those counties. Overall, one in eight jobs in the state is tied directly or indirectly to the auto industry (down from almost one in five a decade ago).

Over the past two years, Ohio's economy has begun to rebound. Unemployment stands at 7 percent, below the national average and down from 9.4 percent in November 2010, when Republicans scored major victories in the midterm elections. Republican Gov. John Kasich claims his policies have helped turn around the economy, but the brightening pic-

ture gives a potential lift to Obama as Election Day nears.

Obama's campaign set a strategy designed to highlight those improvements and to draw a sharp contrast with Romney on the auto bailout in particular.

"It's so rare in presidential politics that you have such a state-specific message," said Pickrell, Obama's Ohio strategist. "The auto bailout gave us that contrast."

Then this summer, once the Republican primaries were over, the Obama campaign began to pound Romney with negative ads focused on his work at Bain Capital. The ads accused Bain of investing in companies that outsourced jobs overseas. The ads highlighted Romney's investments in Cayman Islands accounts and the 14 percent tax rate he paid on \$20 million in income.

Obama officials say the combination of the bailout issue and Romney's business profile hurt him deeply in Ohio. "Governor Romney continues to struggle in Ohio because of his record and because of the positions he's taken on issues," said Jim Messina, Obama's campaign manager.

Romney advisers say the debates helped their candidate overcome that problem. "People saw an unfiltered Governor Romney," Beeson said. "Now they are very resistant when people tell them he's extreme and out of touch."

During the summer, Romney was strapped for cash. Obama's campaign heavily outspent Romney's on television. From early April until the beginning of the political conventions, Obama spent almost \$33 million on television ads in Ohio, according to CMAG, and Romney spent just less than \$10 million, though super PACs helped make up some of that difference.

When the video surfaced of Romney talking about 47 percent of Americans being dependent on government, feeling like victims and unwilling to take personal responsibility for their own lives, he was in trouble in Ohio. Public polls showed Obama with a near double-digit lead. Romney officials concede that in their own polling they were down, but by about half as much.

That brought an intervention by Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio), who was a finalist to be Romney's vice-presidential running mate. Portman pressed senior officials in Romney's campaign to take a more aggressive approach to its Ohio campaign. State director Scott Jennings echoed Portman's concerns.

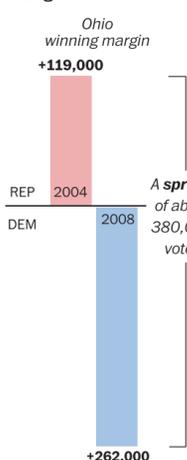
According to one Republican, Portman was "a pretty fierce advocate" for a new approach that included a significant increase in spending on television and more

Ohio swings its own way

This battleground state has a different swing. It's as if hundreds of thousands of Buckeye votes can change their mind. And if you want to find them, hit the road, because they're all over. In almost all other swing states, the 2008 shift from Republican to Democrat was driven by additional voters, mostly in large urban areas. But in Ohio . . .

The 5.7 million 2008 turnout was up only 80,000 from 2004.

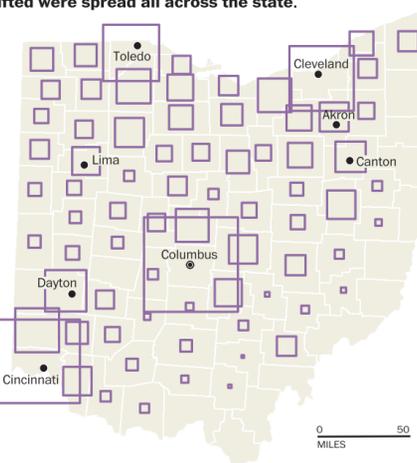
The candidate margins changed far more . . .



Source: Ohio Secretary of State and National Atlas of the United States

And although Ohio's urban areas played their role, the votes that shifted were spread all across the state.

The map charts the spread between the victory margins of the presidential winners in 2004 and 2008. For example, in Hamilton County, the spread between Bush's margin of victory in 2004 and Obama's in 2008 was almost 52,000 votes.



In past elections, both Romney and Obama have done best in Ohio metros and lost most other counties. For Romney on Super Tuesday 2012 and for Obama in 2008, the top counties were Cuyahoga (home to Cleveland) and Hamilton (Cincinnati).

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of Romney's time in the state. At the time, Romney wasn't even advertising in some of the secondary markets in Ohio. That has since changed dramatically. Romney is now almost at parity with Obama in spending.

"We were 18,000 gross ratings points in the hole in Youngstown before we ever got on the air," Jennings said. (Gross ratings points measure the frequency of ads in individual markets.) "We were not on rural radio for months and they were."

Demographically, the battle now is over the votes of white working-class Ohioans, particularly men — a group long resistant to Obama but one the Obama campaign hopes can be swayed over the auto bailout.

Women are also a focus for both campaigns — suburban women torn between concerns about debt and deficits and the social-issue positions of the Republican Party, and women without college degrees who are worried about the economy. Romney officials say their candidate will play better in suburban areas than McCain did four years ago.

The ground game

Victory in Ohio could depend on who has the most effective operation to mobilize supporters. Carol Mohr, an Obama neighborhood team leader in the Columbus

area, was at Wanda Carter's home Thursday night and outlined for other volunteers the voters they will focus on during the final days of the campaign.

"We really care about you if you vote every time, but we're not going to come knock on your door during the get-out-the-vote period," she said. "We care about you until we find out that you're for Romney, and then we'll never knock on your door again. We care about you if you're undecided, and we'll come back to you and talk to you several times until after this weekend. Then we don't care about you if you're undecided. If you haven't made up your mind by Sunday night at 7 o'clock, we don't care about you. After that, we only care about those people who are for Obama but sporadic voters."

Obama's team has 131 offices across the state, with nearly a thousand staging areas, where volunteers meet to fan into their neighborhoods. "If you want to win Ohio and run a ground game that will move votes, it has to be as close to the precinct level as possible and have the kind of leadership that can be centralized but still be quality all the way down to the very, very local level," said Jeremy Bird, Obama's national field director.

Obama has a huge paid staff in Ohio and other states — the cam-

paign will not say how many — but the operation depends on volunteers. It sometimes seems upside down, with 20-something field coordinators paid by the campaign overseeing the work of volunteers twice or three times their age. Neighborhood team leaders, the top category of volunteers, are given considerable responsibility and autonomy but are also held accountable to meet the campaign's goals.

The campaign's research team has studied and tested what works and what doesn't — the optimal number of contacts to get a voter to the polls, the likelihood that someone will volunteer based on their proximity to an Obama office or staging area — all designed with one thing in mind: making it as easy as possible for volunteers to persuade friends, neighbors and relatives to vote for the president.

"As much as I love our paid staff, I don't always want paid staff talking to these people," said Messina, the campaign manager. "We know that at some point people are going to pick the TV up and throw it as far as they can proverbially out of the window and look at their friends and family and neighbors and say, 'What am I going to do in this election?' And that's the moment that Jeremy's organization is going to interact with them in a quantifiably important way."

Romney's ground operation is different, run through "victory" offices of the state and county GOP. In Ohio, the Romney-GOP ground team has 40 local offices and 160 paid staffers. After the debates, said Chris Maloney, the campaign's Ohio spokesman, "we saw a massive increase in volunteer participation across all 40 call centers in Ohio. Within 24 hours we had the bandwidth in place, we flew in more cellphones to complement our lines that are here on the ground. We printed extra walk packets."

"By this time in '08, there was a belief among Republicans that John McCain was not going to win. It was an enthusiasm gap," Jennings said. "We don't have that this year."

Competition now is over early votes. The two campaigns have waged a war with statistics to show that each is besting the other. Both campaigns say their goal is to encourage Ohioans with a lower likelihood of voting to cast an early ballot rather than waiting until Election Day.

There also is competition over how to describe the state of play — in Ohio and nationally. Romney campaign advisers, publicly and privately, say they are on the move but stop a step short of claiming he has an outright lead.

"There is an unmistakable trajectory toward Romney," Jennings said. "We were down a few months, but over the last month we've been steadily ticking up. We've gotten this thing into what is basically a dead heat, but with Romney having momentum."

Obama officials contend that the race here is more stable.

"I am very, very confident," said David Axelrod, Obama's chief strategist. "Everybody's entitled to their own interpretation of whatever they're looking at, but I wouldn't trade places with them for anything."

Many Ohio voters are weary by now of all the campaigning — the ads, the spending, the calls, the door knocks, the mail, all of it. Only those who have recently moved and who don't have land lines are likely to be spared from the get-out-the-vote contacts by the campaigns.

But along with that, there is also a sense here that Ohio is special, that it could well be the decider state in an election of great consequence. Donald Roberson, a member of the Republican Club at Ohio University, is one of those who takes pride in the huge role Ohio is playing this year.

"It feels," he said, "like a great honor."

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