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Surge of black votes wasn't Romney's undoing: Brent Larkin

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More than four months later, some Republicans still can't come to grips with how they blew an eminently winnable presidential election.

Never mind that Mitt Romney's campaign team and pretty much the entire GOP establishment brought a 1912 mentality to a 2012 election.

Or that they ran a campaign that turned off women, young people, blacks, Hispanics and gays. What's most remarkable are the artificial scapegoats some Republicans are blaming for the swing-state massacre, which saw President Barack Obama win 10 of the 11 states that determined the outcome.

The centerpiece of this excuse-making is the theory that an unexpected wave of blacks flocked to the polls Nov. 6, voting for Obama in such huge numbers as to make a Romney win impossible. Because Ohio was the mother of all swing states, Republicans have focused on this state as the textbook example of their urban legend -- repeatedly attributing much of Obama's win here to the president's receiving about 100,000 more black votes in 2012 than he did in 2008.

Not only have conservative bloggers seized on the black-vote theory, but now Romney's top campaign strategist is piling on. In a Washington Post op-ed two Sundays ago, Stuart Stevens tried to answer allegations that the campaign was technologically challenged, arguing instead that other factors drove the outcome.

"Why did 100,000-plus more African Americans in Ohio vote for President Obama than turned out four years ago?" wrote Stevens. "It's not irrelevant that Obamacare is most popular with African Americans."

Until now, there's been little or no public rebuttal of the Republican theory about Ohio, which many seem to accept as gospel.

What makes that so surprising is that the theory is demonstrably false. Worse yet, it's not even close to being true.

Here's why: For Obama to increase his vote total among blacks would have required a dramatic increase in votes from urban areas, where the overwhelming majority of black Ohioans reside. But in Ohio's nine largest urban counties -- Cuyahoga, Franklin, Hamilton, Lucas, Summit, Montgomery, Mahoning, Stark and Lorain -- Obama received 41,248 fewer votes in 2012 than 2008.

Dig a little deeper and the case promoted by the 100,000-vote crowd gets even flimsier. The proof can be found in the voluminous election statistics kept by Mike Dawson, a Columbus-based consultant whose work has been cited by The Plain Dealer, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal and Columbus Dispatch.

Let's start in Cincinnati, where nearly 45 percent of the city's 296,000 residents are black. Yet in the Cincinnati wards where the population is overwhelmingly black (generally between 80 percent and 99 percent), Obama received 47 more votes last year than in 2008. Only 99,953 more to go.

Next consider Dayton, where 43 percent of the city's 142,000 residents are black. In overwhelmingly black neighborhoods there, Obama received 21,772 votes in 2008 and 20,809 in 2012 -- a decrease of 963 votes.

Columbus has six wards with a huge black population. Obama's vote totals there declined by 897 votes in 2012.

Unlike Ohio's other large cities, Columbus' population grew (by 76,000) from 2000 to 2010. And its black population grew at a slightly faster rate than the overall gain -- giving further credence to the argument that the 100,000-vote theory is a canard.

By now, you get the point. But it's also worth noting that results from Akron and Toledo reflect a similar falloff in Obama's 2012 vote totals.

Making a similar, apples-to-apples comparison of Obama's votes from Cleveland's black community is rendered nearly impossible because all of the city's ward and precinct boundaries were redrawn in 2009.

But Obama's vote total in Cleveland, a majority-minority city, declined by 2,271 votes from 2008 to 2012.

And while Cleveland's black population also declined during that period, vote totals in Ohio's other urban areas establish a pattern that can't be explained away by the mere fact that some big-city voters who cast ballots for Obama in 2008 now reside in the suburbs.

"You cannot point to a single statistic that supports the claim there were 100,000 more African-American votes for Obama in 2012 than in 2008," said Dawson, a Republican. "People who think that happened are kidding themselves."

Jim Rhodes was fond of saying politicians are usually 15 years behind the people. But when it comes to the strategists who thought they could make Mitt Romney president, Rhodes would have had to tack on some years.

About 85 of them.