

**Top Ohio Republicans Ask Why Party Lost
Failed Voter Turnout, a Surge of African-Americans at the Polls and a Lack of Love for
the Candidate Cited as Explanations
By Neil King Jr.
Nov. 11, 2012**

Top Ohio Republicans and aides to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign remain flabbergasted over what went wrong Tuesday in a do-or-die state they thought they would win all the way up to the final hours.

Was it a failed voter-turnout operation? An unforeseen surge in African-American voters? A lack of real love for the candidate?

Ohio Republicans see evidence for all those explanations, a surprise after their polls and modeling of the electorate told them that a late tide of enthusiasm and a large swing among independent voters would push Mr. Romney over the top, despite lagging for months in nearly all public polls. In the end, Mr. Romney lost by more than 2 percentage points. Based on the still-incomplete tally, he looks set to garner fewer votes even than Sen. [John McCain](#) did in 2008.

WSJ reporters parse through the historic 2012 election campaign, including how Barack Obama was able to build his winning majority and where the result leaves the GOP. Photo: Associated Press.

Picking through the wreckage, many put the blame on what turned out to be an unexpectedly weak GOP ground game, particularly in the final days. Others point to infighting within the state party that they say crippled the campaign's organization.

Some cite evidence—now clear in county-by-county vote totals—that the Obama administration's auto-industry bailout, combined with a summer ad barrage, left a decisive imprint that Mr. Romney never shook off.

A look at several of the state's key counties shows how lackluster the Romney effort was. With final tabulations of provisional and absentee ballots still not finished, Mr. Romney remains short of Mr. McCain's haul in nearly all the most vote-rich counties, including Cuyahoga County in the Cleveland area and Hamilton County, which includes Cincinnati.

In the counties where he did outperform Mr. McCain, such as in conservative Warren County, north of Cincinnati, the net gain in votes was small. He won Warren by just 3,000 votes more than Mr. McCain.

"The assumptions many made that the president's base wasn't fired up were just not accurate," said Doug Preisse, GOP chairman in Franklin County. "But the most surprising result was that turnout for Romney was off in so many counties."

Political Analyst Bill Schneider says Barack Obama's victory was a win for a "New America" and warns the GOP must reinvent itself. WSJ reporters recap an historic election and look ahead to the economic challenges facing the new Congress. Photo: AP.

Romney spokeswoman Andrea Saul said the campaign in Ohio made "nearly three million door knocks, the purest form of voter contact." But the Obama campaign, she said, promised to alter the electorate "and they succeeded at doing so."

Ohio's Republican secretary of state, Jon Husted, says he isn't sure the tide of Romney enthusiasm ever really existed. "I think that was pre-election spin," he said. "I don't think there was any real evidence of it."

With the pain of the Romney loss still fresh, many Republicans in the state are now casting blame on get-out-the-vote operations run by the Republican National Committee and the Romney campaign.

One elaborate national initiative, dubbed Orca and run by the Romney campaign, was designed to station a monitor at every precinct in Ohio and other battleground states. The idea was that each monitor would report back electronically as voters arrived at the polls, so that Romney campaign canvassers would know which supporters still hadn't voted.

But "Orca completely collapsed in the last week before the election," said Jim Woods, a local Romney organizer in Medina County, west of Akron.

Republicans across the state say the program failed for a variety of reasons, some computer-related and some due to poor organization. That deprived thousands of volunteers of tools they needed at polling locations and left the campaign without information needed to dislodge votes on Election Day. An extensive voter-mobilization effort by the Obama campaign, built up over years, made the Republicans' problems more dire.

RNC spokesman Sean Spicer defended the overall GOP voter-turnout operation, saying Republican turnout is up in every battleground state compared with 2008, except in Ohio.

One top Romney Ohio campaign aide, who declined to be named, also defended the campaign's strategy and attributed the loss to an unexpectedly large turnout among African-American voters.

Exit polls pointed to a rise from 2008 in turnout among black voters, from 13% to 15% of the total Ohio electorate. Still, President Barack Obama is now 38,000 votes shy of his 2008 tally in Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, the city with the state's largest concentration of African-American voters.

Mike Dawson, an Ohio GOP strategist, notes that six of the top 10 counties in which Mr. Romney outperformed George W. Bush's vote count in 2004 were all in southeastern Ohio, where Mr. Romney's pro-coal message resonated.

"But eight of the 10 counties where Romney did worse than Bush were all in the northwest of the state—auto country," Mr. Dawson said, adding that those counties are far more populated than the coal area of the state. "Clearly the auto issue was very significant."

Once all the votes are tallied, total turnout in Ohio may approach what it was in 2008, even including the 75,000 or so Ohio voters who went to the polls but decided not to cast a ballot in the presidential contest.

Mr. Romney has 2,583,582 votes in the latest tally, some 94,000 votes shy of Mr. McCain's total in the prior election. Mr. Obama has 2,690,841 votes in the latest tally, nearly 250,000 fewer than his mark of four years ago.

One of the more striking outcomes of the Ohio vote, Mr. Dawson said, was that Mr. Obama appears to have maintained his margins from 2008 in the cluster of counties that surround Columbus, a populous area that swings between the parties.

He and others attribute that success to two factors: The relative health of the region's economy, and a heavy run of attack ads that pummeled Mr. Romney there all summer, targeting his business career and his position on abortion. "None of this was by accident," Mr. Dawson said. "The Obama campaign knew if they captured central Ohio, they would win."