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Statistics show winning central Ohio is key to winning Ohio

Joe Hallett – Columbus Dispatch

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As the tally of Ohio's presidential election was certified on Thursday, Franklin County Democratic Party Chairman Greg Haas oozed pride over the way central Ohio delivered for President Barack Obama.

“What accounts for a lot of the success was the ground game that was put together,” he said over coffee. “The activists kept working all the way through, and they worked in every part of the county.”

Much was written about an apparent enthusiasm gap for Obama, while the huge Ohio crowds that GOP nominee Mitt Romney attracted in the final weeks fueled a belief that momentum was with him. In the end, Obama won Ohio by 2.98 percentage points, below his 4.6 percent victory against John McCain in 2008.

In truth, both Obama and Romney suffered an enthusiasm gap. Romney got 16,413 fewer votes statewide than McCain did in 2008, a decline of 0.61 percent, and Obama received 122,423 fewer votes in 2012, or 3.82 percent less, than he did four years earlier.

But Franklin County and central Ohio were bright spots for Obama and proved for a second consecutive presidential election to be Ohio's new battleground, according to an analysis by Mike Dawson, a Columbus-based elections statistics expert whose work has been cited by *The Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and other news organizations.

Of Ohio's six major urban counties, Franklin is the only one in which Obama increased his vote take from four years earlier. He won 11,627 more votes in the county, or 3.5 percent more, than he did in 2008. Compare that to Cuyahoga, Ohio's largest and most-Democratic urban county, where Obama fetched 11,190 fewer votes than he did four years ago.

In 2008, Obama became the first Democrat since Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 to win the 20-county central Ohio region, beating McCain by about 2.5 percentage points. Obama won it again last month, this time increasing his vote take to 3.7 percent. Of Ohio's six regions, central Ohio is the only one in which Obama received more votes than four years earlier.

After reviewing Dawson's findings, Haas said, “Literally, if you win the Columbus media market, you win Ohio.”

In his analysis, Dawson uncovered some apparent myths:

- *That Obama was boosted by a huge African-American turnout.* A day after the election, Scott Jennings, Romney's Ohio campaign manager, looked at exit polls and saw a key to Obama's victory: Black voters comprised 15 percent of the Ohio electorate, 4 percent more than in 2008, and Obama won those votes by a 96-3 percentage point margin.

But Dawson's analysis of votes in the predominantly black wards of Columbus and Cincinnati — which have black populations of 28 percent and 44 percent, respectively — showed that Obama did not significantly increase his African-American votes over 2008.

In the 11 Columbus wards where he received at least 90 percent of the vote in November, Obama actually got 708 fewer votes (2.2 percent less) than in 2008. In the 21 Columbus wards where Obama received at least 80 percent of the vote, he improved his vote total in those wards over 2008 by less than a percentage point, compared with a 2.5 percent vote increase in the city overall.

In the 13 overwhelmingly black Cincinnati wards where Obama won at least 80 percent of the vote in November, he received almost 4 percent fewer votes (1,789) in those wards than four years earlier.

- *That Romney was a better candidate than McCain.* Not really. While getting just 0.78 percent more of the vote than McCain did four years ago, Romney actually received fewer overall votes statewide. And although Romney was thought to be better organized, in Franklin County he got 12,171 fewer pre-Election Day votes than McCain. Romney did get 10,647 more votes in the county than McCain did on Election Day.

Overall in Franklin County, Romney received 2,499 fewer votes than McCain.

Dawson's conclusion: "When you consider all of the things that are statistically happening statewide, it's hard to see how a Republican can win Ohio if they do not do better in Franklin County and central Ohio."

Joe Hallett is senior editor at The Dispatch.