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Ohio, the Bull's-eye State: Obama, Romney aim full arsenals at vital electoral prize

By Dan Balz and Felicia Sonmez, Published: October 27, 2012

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Kathy Wade was out mowing her lawn on a raw and rainy Friday when Doyle and Jane Peyton, volunteer canvassers for Mitt Romney's campaign, stopped at the curb in her suburban neighborhood 20 miles from Columbus. Doyle asked her: Had she decided how she would vote in the presidential election?

Wade paused. "I am one of those lovely, undecided Ohio female voters," she said. She was reluctant to talk much about the choice she faces in deciding between Romney and President Obama, she said, but the smile on her face reflected the understanding that she and every other voter in Ohio — decided or not — are at the center of one of the epic struggles in presidential politics.

Ohio has played a central role in presidential campaigns for many years, but at no time has its significance been as great as in 2012. It is as if the entire presidential campaign is being waged in this complex and sprawling state.

A cartoon by Rob Rogers of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette this month captured the symbolic significance of the Buckeye State. Three schoolchildren stood before a U.S. map with no lines delineating the states. The map said simply, "Ohio." "I like the new map," one of the youngsters says. "It's a lot easier than memorizing fifty states."

There is nothing cartoonish about the campaign here. Obama and Romney are engaged in a high-stakes battle for the state's 18 electoral votes. If Obama can win them, Romney's path to the 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidency becomes almost — almost — insurmountable.

Two months ago, Obama had a small lead in Ohio. A month ago, after Romney's "47 percent" comment, Obama's lead rose to eight to 10 points, according to several public polls. In the aftermath of the debates, Romney's campaign has been infused with fresh energy. Some recent polls showed the president with a slender advantage, but the newest survey, released Saturday night by a consortium of Ohio newspapers, showed Obama and Romney now tied at 49 percent each. The consortium's poll last month had Obama ahead by five points.

A handful of other states remain in play. Florida is the biggest of all the battleground prizes, with 29 electoral votes. It is a must-win for Romney. Both campaigns expect Virginia to be a nail-biter. Colorado and New Hampshire appear exceedingly close. The Obama campaign refuses to give up on North Carolina, though Romney is favored there. Romney will not yield in Nevada, though the Obama team remains confident there. Wisconsin, too, is expected to be close. Still, because of its centrality in the electoral-college calculations, Ohio continues to draw the most focus and intensity, with the battle being waged at all times and on all fronts. Hardly a day now passes without Obama and Romney, or their running mates, Vice President Biden and Rep. Paul Ryan (Wis.) visiting the state — often on the same day.

Since the political conventions, Romney has been in Ohio on 12 different days, holding 27 events. Ryan has done 19 events in 12 days, according to his campaign. Obama's campaign said the president has been here seven days since his convention, holding 10 events. Biden has held 10 events on six days of campaigning.

Romney announced Saturday that he was canceling a day of campaigning in Virginia on Sunday because of Hurricane Sandy. Where's he going instead? Back to Ohio.

Romney will remain there Monday and Tuesday and will be back again before Election Day. Obama is scheduled to appear with former president Bill Clinton on Monday and will return again two days later. White House officials announced late Saturday that a planned rally by Obama in Virginia on Monday night and an event in Colorado Springs on Tuesday have been canceled. It's almost a certainty that both candidates will be in Ohio during the campaign's last hours.

Final arguments have been readied. Romney is now presenting himself as the candidate of change to Obama's status quo. Obama continues to challenge Romney's policy proposals as harmful to the middle class. The two trade charges over the health of the auto industry and who is tougher when it comes to dealing with China.

On Thursday, before a crowd of 12,000 in [Defiance](#), Romney claimed that Chrysler's new owners were preparing to ship production of Jeeps overseas. Chrysler officials said that isn't true. It was a measure of the degree to which candidates are trying to tailor messages to Ohio voters, and the risks of doing so.

Armies of volunteers prowl the streets daily and always on weekends, armed with clipboards and walking sheets telling them which houses contain undecided voters or potential supporters who might need a gentle shove.

Wanda Carter, a neighborhood team leader for Obama's campaign, stood before three dozen volunteers who were gathered at her home in Upper Arlington on Thursday night for hot dogs and a last pep talk before the final push to turn out voters.

"If you are reading the newspapers and watching TV, what are you always hearing?" she said. "Get out the vote. Ground game. It's the ground game. It's the ground game. It's the ground game. And that is us. At this point, we and all the other people who are doing what we are doing are the most important people in the campaign."

[Political ads](#) run nonstop during local television newscasts. Since April, ads by the two campaigns have run 187,000 times in markets blanketing Ohio, at a cost of almost \$120 million, according to Kantar Media's Campaign Media Analysis Group. In the past month alone, CMAG officials say, 70 different ads have been shown here, testament to the campaigns' efforts to tailor messages to particular voters in a state that is culturally and economically diverse.

Radio ads are nearly as prevalent. Drive the clogged roads in the fast-growing suburban and exurban areas around Columbus and the ads play almost nonstop in between songs or news. Direct-mail pieces are clogging mailboxes. One Romney supporter estimated he has received 50 of them this fall.

Phone calls from the campaigns have become so incessant that many people have stopped answering — or solved the nightly intrusions by casting an early vote and thereby removing themselves from the campaigns' voter contact lists.

Libby Gulden of Madeira, a dozen miles northeast of Cincinnati, said she and her husband have been receiving 10 to 12 calls a day. As if on cue, the cordless phone in her hand started to ring. She noticed a 202 area code — Washington, D.C. — on the screen. “And here’s what I do with these calls,” she said.

She clicked the “on” button, and then she clicked the “off” button.

Dissecting Ohio

Ask the strategists assigned to Ohio and they will tell you that running a campaign here is like running a national campaign. Ohio is that complex. Five regions and three major cities — Cleveland, Cincinnati and Columbus — define the culture, politics and economic underpinnings of the state.

Northeast Ohio encompasses Cleveland, Akron and Youngstown — cities identified with the heavy manufacturing and steel plants that once were at the heart of the state’s economy. Northwest Ohio, which includes Toledo as well as tiny Defiance, sits close to Detroit and has also been dependent on automobiles and manufacturing. But it is more rural, less populated and more Republican.

Southwest Ohio, which includes Cincinnati, is more classically Midwest in flavor. Southeast Ohio is Appalachia — coal country — with cultural ties to the South.

Central Ohio, anchored by Columbus, is younger, with a larger proportion of white-collar workers, and it is home to Ohio State, the state’s largest university.

Eight years ago, [Sen. John F. Kerry](#) (D-Mass.) lost the state by 120,000 votes. Four years ago, Obama won it by 262,000. He won in part because he adopted an 88-county strategy rather than concentrating only on the biggest counties. As a result, he did well in Republican-leaning suburbs and raided votes from smaller, rural red counties.

An analysis of the voting patterns by Republican Mike Dawson, an Ohio election statistics expert, found that 17 of the 20 counties where Obama saw the biggest percentage increases in raw vote totals over 2004 were GOP counties. In the heavily Democratic Cleveland suburbs of Cuyahoga County, for example, he got 9,919 more votes than Kerry. In heavily Republican Delaware County, north of Columbus, he lost to [Sen. John McCain](#) (R-Ariz.) and won just 36,653 votes, but that was still 9,605 more than Kerry.

Aaron Pickrell, the Obama campaign's chief Ohio strategist, said he expects to see similar results this year. "We're running the same campaign as in 2008, but we're just better," he said.

But Rich Beeson, the Romney campaign's national political director, said Obama would not replicate 2008 this year. "We're going to ratchet up turnout in those rural areas to Bush '04 levels," he said. "It's small numbers, but it's going to be big margins."

Ohio's population is 11.5 million, with about 8 million registered voters. Registration drives have added few net voters to the rolls, and turnout in 2004 and 2008 was not significantly different — nor is it expected to change much this year. The campaigns know what the electorate looks like, who they are, where they live and how many votes they need.

One voter at a time

Kathy Wade is one of the few undecided voters left in Ohio. When she stopped her yardwork to talk to the Peytons on Friday afternoon, she said she saw positives and negatives in both Romney and Obama. But she was left with a nagging question about the GOP nominee. Having seen him run to the right during the Republican nomination battle, she said she was now watching him try to move to the center. "It makes you question where he really is," she said.

Both the Peytons offered reasons why she should continue to consider Romney over Obama. Wade remained noncommittal but assured them: "I don't want you to think I'm anti-Romney, because I'm not. I see pros and cons on both sides."

Jane Peyton continued to press the case for Romney. Both she and her husband are newcomers to political campaigns. "I have never done this before," she told Wade, "but I cannot be stopped this year. I passionately believe in it."

David Gulden, Libby's husband, supported Obama in 2008 while his wife backed McCain. "I'm traditionally a conservative Republican, but I wanted change and better communications, so I voted for Obama," he said.

Gulden added that he caught flak from his friends for that transgression. Over the past year, he decided he would support the Republican ticket. Obama's health-care law was a major reason. "The way the whole group pushed it and hadn't even read it, that kind of frustrated me a little bit," he said.

Most Ohio voters made up their minds some time ago. Some who are backing Obama again remain enthusiastic about him; others see their support more in terms of duty than inspiration.

Kelly Thomas, a county worker in Lorain, was getting ready to cast an early ballot this week. "Last time, I was so excited," she said. "Now it's like I have to do it because I have to do it."

Along Route 6, which hugs the shore of Lake Erie west of Cleveland, Obama signs appear frequently but then give way to strings of Romney signs.

“We get calls all the time, mostly Obama rather than Romney,” said Stacy Farnan, a registered nurse. She has made up her mind. She has a “Catholics Against Obama” bumper sticker and a sign that is a parody of the Obama “Hope” message of four years ago: “Nope.”

At the bottom of the state, the Appalachian Highway heads east from Cincinnati to Athens in the southeast corner of Ohio. Home to Ohio University, this was one of Obama’s strongest counties in 2008. He returned two weeks ago to speak to 14,000 people, and his campaign has been offering students 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 picture 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 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 campaign 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 and dispute that Romney truly has momentum here.

“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.”