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Margin of victory in northeastern Ohio is key; anything less than a big Obama victory would bode well for Romney

By Joe Vardon - Columbus Dispatch

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CLEVELAND — The scene President Barack Obama saw when he visited Cleveland State University on Halloween two years ago was a scary one, not only for him but for then-Gov. Ted Strickland as well.

It was the final weekend before the election, and both Obama and Vice President Joe Biden came to the Wolstein Center in downtown Cleveland to stump for Strickland, who was up for re-election against now-Gov. John Kasich.

About 8,000 people showed up — leaving 6,000 empty seats to frighten all the prominent Democrats in the house.

Two days later, 84,131 fewer votes were counted for Strickland in Cuyahoga County than in 2006, when he thumped Republican J. Kenneth Blackwell in the Democratic safe haven with 71 percent of the vote. Strickland still defeated Kasich in Cuyahoga County with 58 percent support, but he lost statewide by 77,127 votes.

It's a different year, and Obama — not Strickland — is on the ballot. But the message is the same: If Obama doesn't dominate in northeastern Ohio as he did four years ago, he almost surely will lose the state to Republican Mitt Romney. And a loss in Ohio could translate into a one-term presidency.

“What happened in 2010 is a reminder of what happens when you elect a president and then fall asleep,” said Democratic state Sen. Nina Turner of Cleveland, an African-American and strong Obama supporter. “The president has to win big here, and he will. Cuyahoga County is going to deliver.”

Obama didn't just clean up in Cuyahoga County, where Cleveland is located, but throughout the 17-county Cleveland media market in 2008. According to statistics compiled by elections expert Mike Dawson, Obama collected more than 1.1 million votes in the region, more than doubling his vote total from any other media market in a state he won by 4.6 percentage points. He defeated U.S. Sen. John McCain by more than 16.5 percentage points in the area; in the five elections preceding Obama's 2008 triumph, the Democratic candidate won the Cleveland media market by an average of 10 percentage points.

Obama's performance in the region was anchored by his effort in Cuyahoga County, an urban county with the state's largest African-American population, where he won 68 percent of the vote in 2008. It's difficult to determine exactly how many African-Americans helped elect the first black president — exit polls show African-Americans made up 11 percent of the vote in Ohio in 2008, and 97 percent of those voters supported Obama — but he almost certainly can't pull off a repeat without a similar level of support from black voters.

"This year, we're going to come out even more for him," said Stephanie Hill, 55, of Cleveland, a Cuyahoga County custodial worker. "Obama's done nothing but try to make it right since he's got in office."

There seem to be, however, at least three reasons why Hill could be wrong, according to several people on both sides of the aisle who live and work in and around Cleveland and spoke with *The Dispatch*. Two narratives pushed by Republicans are that Obama has failed African-Americans as president, which will lead to a depressed turnout, and that GOP outreach in suburban communities will bring more people to the polls for Romney than for any Republican presidential candidate since Ronald Reagan. In an election cycle whose focus each month has been on the nation's stubborn unemployment rate, Republicans point to the 13.4 percent unemployment rate among African-Americans — nearly six points higher than the nation's overall rate of 7.8 percent — as proof that Obama hasn't delivered.

"There seems to be an interest in the African-American community, a willingness in the Republican agenda," said Robert Frost, chairman of the Cuyahoga County Republican Party. "Those being said, take a look at the other side, what Barack Obama has got to do. You look at minority unemployment, when you look at minority youth unemployment, people who believed him four years ago and then this is what they've been through? ... He's been president for 44 months; how can he say he needs more time?"

The other narrative is one suggested by Democrats: Restrictions on early in-person voting implemented by Republican state lawmakers disproportionately affect African-Americans' voting patterns but could have the opposite effect.

"If there was a lull in enthusiasm, there isn't going to be one now," said Turner, who says perceptions that their voting rights are being threatened will only drive more blacks to the polls. The Rev. Timothy Eppinger, pastor at God's Tabernacle of Faith in Garfield Heights, said the passion still burns for Obama within his church community. He said Obama's federal stimulus package, the auto bailout and his push for more funding for public jobs all had at least the potential to benefit African-Americans.

He said the frustration of his church members is directed toward a Republican-controlled Congress that resisted Obama on initiatives such as the American Jobs Act, which would've pumped billions of dollars into communities for construction jobs and for public jobs such as teachers and police officers.

"He's not just the president of African-Americans; he is the president of the United States," Eppinger said. "People were excited when an African-American was elected president, not just people of color but people around the world."

“Yes, we’re still excited. We have an opportunity to follow through and see that his progress won’t be held up.”

Voter turnout is how Frost and the Republicans in Cuyahoga County can deliver the state — if not their own county — for Romney.

Buoyed by Romney’s clear victory over Obama during their first debate in Denver earlier this month, Frost said people in suburban Cleveland, in Catholic communities like Parma — where Obama and McCain broke even — are passionate for Romney and reject Obama’s policies on energy, taxes and the economy.

Republicans say an improved ground game from 2008 and growing support for the Romney-Ryan ticket will translate into enough votes from northeastern Ohio to push Romney over the top statewide.

“Our goal, you can look on election night, if you see a quarter of a million (GOP) votes coming out of Cuyahoga County, Mitt Romney has won the state,” Frost said. “I’ll give you one benchmark you can look for: If it’s 225,000, Romney should be OK; if it’s under 200,000, he’s probably in trouble.

“We set an aggressive goal because we want to deliver more votes than any other county.”