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Central Ohio is main battleground for Barack Obama and Mitt Romney: Brent Larkin

By Brent Larkin – Cleveland Plain Dealer

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President Barack Obama didn't pick Ohio State University as the place to launch his re-election bid because he bleeds scarlet and gray.

He picked it because of all the colleges, in all the towns, in all the country, none is located in a more important region than the one Obama dropped into for his May 5 campaign kickoff. In fact, of the 11 or 12 swing states where voters will pick either Obama or Mitt Romney as the next president, the most crucial of all battlegrounds is probably central Ohio.

Supporting that statement requires that Ohio be the most important of all the swing states. Ohio and Florida usually compete for that title, but early spending on television advertising has made clear this year is no contest.

Spending figures compiled by The Washington Post show that, as of early July, more than \$39 million had been spent on television ads in Ohio by the two candidates and affiliated groups. That is, by far, more than has been spent in any other state.

As of July 3, the Obama campaign itself (excluding affiliated groups) had spent \$22 million in Ohio, with Florida second, at \$17 million. The Romney campaign had spent \$6.4 million in Ohio, with North Carolina second, at \$4.7 million.

Making the case for central Ohio being more important than Northeast Ohio is complicated by the fact that the 17-county Cleveland media market, though essentially a no-growth part of the state, is by no small margin still the largest.

In the 2008 presidential election, more than one in three votes (34.5 percent) came from the Cleveland media market. At the time, Cleveland was the nation's 14th-largest market. Now it's 18th.

During that same period, the 19-county Columbus media market has grown from 34th to 32nd. The Cincinnati market slipped from 33rd to 35th.

But the Cleveland media market is reliably Democratic and the Cincinnati market consistently Republican.

In 2008, Obama defeated John McCain in the Cleveland media market by 16.5 percent. McCain carried the Cincinnati media market by 11.2 percent.

In the 107 days remaining until the election, both campaigns will work hard to maximize their winning margins in those two markets. But the key to victory for both candidates is the Columbus media market. Here's why:

Central Ohio is the state's fastest-growing region. Sometime in the next decade, Franklin will become the state's largest county. Its population is younger, more educated and more affluent than Northeast Ohio's. Most important, it has huge numbers of persuadable voters -- ones not tied to a political party.

For decades, central Ohio was a bastion of Republicanism. In the presidential election of 1988, George H.W. Bush won the Columbus media market by 25.8 percent. But in the four presidential elections that followed, the winning margin for Republican presidential candidates dropped dramatically.

And in 2008, the Columbus media market finally flipped. Obama won it by 2.8 percent. Those and other comprehensive election statistics were compiled by Mike Dawson, who served as a top aide to former Gov. George Voinovich and later Sen. Mike DeWine. Dawson said it will be almost impossible for Romney to win Ohio unless he reverses that 2008 result from central Ohio.

Dawson is a Republican. But two prominent Democrats don't dispute that view. Former Columbus Dispatch Associate Publisher Mike Curtin, soon to be a Democratic state representative from the city's west side, called central Ohio a kind of "large-scale focus group," adding that political evidence demonstrates "no area of the state is more important than central Ohio." And Herb Asher, professor emeritus of political science at Ohio State, said the Columbus media market has "more swing voters than other parts of the state" and "huge numbers of young voters not tied to political parties."

Politico, the digital news organization that covers the presidential race as thoroughly as any news outlet in the country, constantly focuses on the status of the campaign in Ohio -- with a particular emphasis on the Columbus area.

"In the 1970s, the rule of thumb was a Democrat had to win Cuyahoga County by 100,000 votes to win the state," said Greg Haas, chosen last week as the new chair of the Franklin County Democratic Party. "Over time, that rule of thumb has evolved. The focus of statewide elections has changed."

He's right. Northeast Ohio still matters -- a lot.

But in elections for president, central Ohio now might matter more.