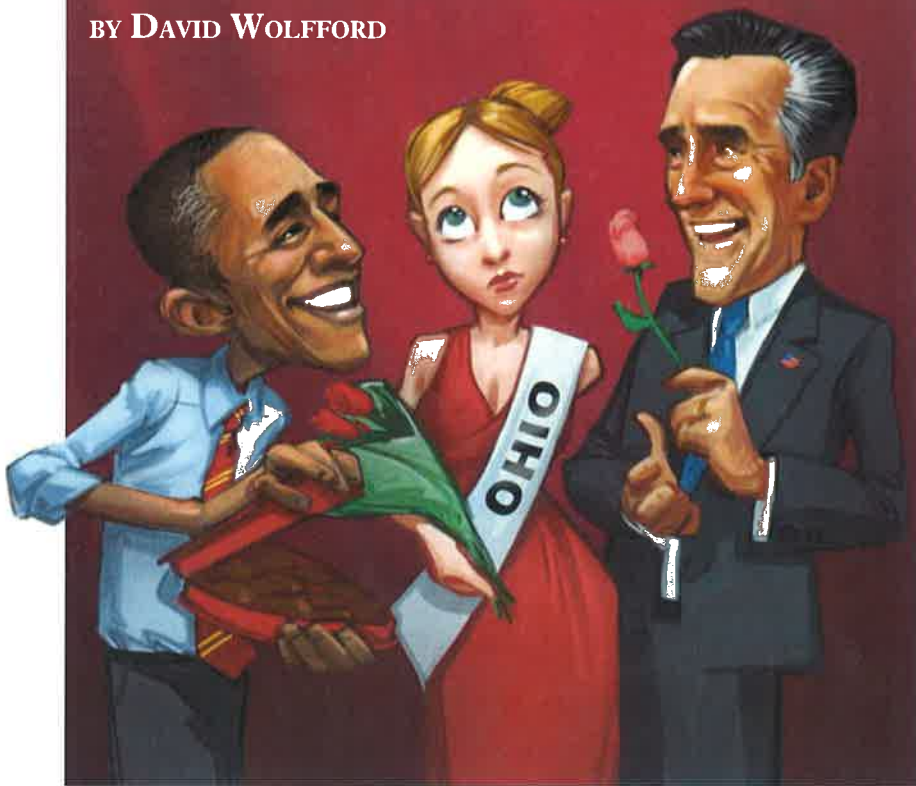


Romancing Ohio

The wooing of swing state voters proceeds apace.

BY DAVID WOLFFORD



Cincinnati
No candidate has won the presidency without Ohio since John Kennedy, and no Republican has done so ever. At this writing, the state's 18 electoral votes are in play, and both campaigns are visiting Ohio with the insistence of a determined suitor.

No sooner had Mitt Romney named Paul Ryan as his running mate (after seriously considering Ohio senator Rob Portman) than Ryan stumped at his alma mater, Miami University in Oxford, 30 miles northwest of Cincinnati. Both parties placed leading Ohio politicians on their national convention stages in prime time. And after the

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GOP convention, the Romneys made their first campaign stop in Cincinnati.

The response in the state was not especially enthusiastic. By late September, Barack Obama led Romney in the *Real Clear Politics* state average by 5 points; one poll gave the president a 10-point lead. Romney and Ryan toured the state by bus for three days, and Obama's RCP lead grew to 5.6 points. Pundits predicted Romney's team might shift resources from Ohio to other battlegrounds.

Then came October 3. The night of the first presidential debate, at Romney's campaign office on Cincinnati's working-class west side, anxious conservatives in Romney T-shirts ate finger sandwiches and cookies from a potluck table. A few volunteers manned the phones. But

when Romney came out swinging and, paraphrasing Joe Biden, declared the middle class has been "buried" in the last four years, the room was electrified. Supporters finally had the aggressive Romney they wanted. "After the debate, we got a lot of phone calls for yard signs," state GOP chairman Bob Bennett told me. "We had to put in a new order." Soon Romney was back in Ohio, speaking in Cuyahoga Falls, Lancaster, Mt. Vernon, and more to audiences averaging 9,000 a stop.

The president, too, has come courting, seeking the youth vote and claiming credit for the state's increased jobs. Unemployment has fallen to 7 percent, and in the Cleveland area—where Obama emphasizes the auto bailout—manufacturing unemployment has dropped 2.5 percentage points from a year ago.

The Obama campaign is strongly urging supporters to vote early. The first lady addressed a crowd of nearly 7,000 in Cincinnati on October 2, the first day of early voting, and encouraged voters to go straight to their local board of elections to cast their ballot. A week later, the president addressed a crowd more than twice that size at Ohio State University, in Columbus, and his campaign took supporters by bus to register or vote. The Franklin County Board of Elections tallied 842 registered Democrats voting that day, as well as over 3,194 unaffiliated voters, but only 182 Republicans.

As of last Thursday, more than 16,000 in-person votes had been cast in the Columbus area, 4,342 by registered Democrats, 1,202 by Republicans, and 10,854 by independents. Analysts believe the unaffiliated are disproportionately voting for Obama, partly because Ohio determines party preference by the party ballot requested in the previous primary; since the last Democratic presidential primary was uncontested, turnout was low.

"The president has a stronger ground game," says Daniel Coffey of the University of Akron's Ray C. Bliss Institute and coauthor of *Buckeye Battleground* (2011), which argued that personal voter contacts were crucial in Ohio in the last two presidential

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elections. The AFL-CIO is also registering voters—roughly 65,000 this year, according to its state president, Tim Burga. Union “members haven’t forgotten” the Republicans’ attempt last year to eliminate public sector collective bargaining, says Burga. The collective-bargaining measure, passed by a Republican-dominated legislature and signed by Republican governor John Kasich, was repealed by referendum last November.

Meanwhile, Ohio’s Republican secretary of state, John Husted, just lost the final round in an early-voting controversy: The U.S. Supreme Court last week rejected his plan to free election officials from the burden of early voting on the final three days before November 6. African-American leaders, who’d alleged “voter suppression,” are touting this victory in black precincts.

If the first debate moved the ball closer to the 50-yard line in the Buckeye State, it’s too early to move the chains after the candidates’ second encounter. Romney’s bedrock challenge in Ohio remains what it’s always been: to win Reagan Democrats, social conservatives, and the Appalachian region to the east and southeast.

“The group to watch is white working-class voters,” says Paul Beck, a longtime communications and political science professor at Ohio State. In the 2008 primary, they did not warm to Obama—Hillary Clinton won 66 percent—but this year they are wary of Romney. His “47 percent” comment was received with mixed emotions. “These voters resent people that live off government,” says Beck. “On the other hand, they are asking, ‘Am I part of the *them*, or am I part of the *us*?’”

Romney is targeting this group with a one-minute ad in which he looks straight into the camera and says: “President Obama and I both care about poor and middle-class families. . . . We shouldn’t measure compassion by how many people are on welfare, we should measure compassion by how many people are able to get off welfare and get a good paying job.”

The pitch has little chance of succeeding in true blue Cleveland, but Romney aims to capture

white working-class voters, libertarians, and independents in surrounding Cuyahoga County. The local Republican chairman, Rob Frost, is optimistic. The number of registered Democrats in the county has dropped by 52,000 since 2008, and the number of Republicans has risen by nearly 34,000.

Communities centered on the auto industry want free and fair trade policies, and some are skeptical of bailouts, says Frost. “Take Parma,” with its nearby Ford Motor plant. “Ford refused the bailout, restructured, and eliminated their debt. This community resents the bailout and embraces the handicap”—that is, the handicap of

Romney’s ‘47 percent’ comment was received with mixed emotions among working-class white voters, says Ohio State’s Paul Beck: ‘These voters resent people that live off government. On the other hand, they are asking, “Am I part of the *them*, or am I part of the *us*?”’

now competing against companies that took public money.

As for social conservatives, Buck Niehoff—Cincinnati attorney, fundraiser for Republicans from George H.W. Bush through John McCain, and the author of *Winning Cincinnati*—explains, “National races are won or lost on Republican turnout in Greater Cincinnati, which can offset Cleveland. Until the [first] debate . . . Romney never made a connection.” As of last week, Niehoff thought there was still time to get social conservatives fired up.

In the sparsely populated Appalachian region, the predominantly white working-class and social-conservative electorate mostly voted for Bill Clinton, then George W. Bush. In 2004, southeast Ohio favored amending the Ohio constitution to enshrine traditional marriage by over 70 percent, while giving Bush 54 percent of the vote. It’s the kind of region where

voters cling to their guns and their religion (in the infamous Obama phrase) . . . and their coal. The Democrats’ liberal evolution could turn this region—and thus Ohio—Romney’s way.

“Gay marriage and coal are both winning issues in our area,” says Brian Wilson, Republican chairman of Jefferson County, along the western bank of the upper Ohio. Wilson and coal advocates insist EPA standards have increased electricity rates and shut down power plants and coal mines. In 2008, roughly 36,000 votes were cast here; Obama won the county by a mere 76 ballots over McCain. Statewide, unemployment in mining and logging has risen 2.5 percentage points from last year. It’s why Romney emphasized oil, coal, and gas in the Hofstra debate.

On October 13, Romney stopped in Portsmouth, where the Scioto River flows into the Ohio, and spoke encouragingly about a uranium enrichment plant proposed nearby as taking America one step closer to energy independence. From there he headed west to Lebanon, to speak at the Golden Lamb, an 1803 inn owned by the family of Senator Portman. In a county that four years ago cast more than twice as many votes for McCain as for Obama, over 10,000 gathered to hear Romney, Portman, and Bengals Hall-of-Famer Anthony Muñoz. This was the twentieth Ohio county Romney had visited since the primary in March, and the sixth last week.

The second debate seems unlikely to have changed much. A one-day Rasmussen survey the day after showed Romney at 49 percent and Obama at 48 percent in the state. So the wooing continues.

Paul Ryan dropped by Cincinnati’s municipal airport the day before the debate and appeared with Condoleeza Rice in Cleveland the day after. The president, too, has returned to battleground Ohio, this time appearing before 14,000 at Ohio University in Athens, a liberal island in the otherwise mixed southeast. When supporters booed Romney, Obama responded with his standard line: “Don’t boo—vote.” ♦