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Rural Illinois May Offer Clues to Obama's Electability

Courting of Rural Areas Began in '96

By Alec MacGillis
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CHESTER, Ill. -- The rookie state senator from Chicago had driven 340 miles to explore southern Illinois, but Barb Brown could muster only 20 Democrats in this small town on the [Mississippi River](#) to have breakfast with him. She asked her niece and sister-in-law, who were helping in the kitchen, to come out to pad the audience.

"We tried to convince people that they needed to come out and meet with this senator from Chicago, who on top of everything else was African American," Brown, a circuit court clerk, said of the 1997 gathering. "We had people looking at us strangely."

As [Sen. Barack Obama](#) emerges as the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, worries linger in his party over whether he can improve on his poor showing among many rural and blue-collar voters in the primaries. Clues to that question lie in Illinois outside metro Chicago, a 400-mile swath of corn and soybean fields that, in the coal country of its southern reaches, shares more with Kentucky and Missouri than with Chicago.

Obama's courting of the region began soon after he was elected to the legislature in 1996. Southern Illinoisans interpreted the visits as a sign that he was already thinking about a future run for statewide office, but the trips also served as an education in the middle-American milieu that Obama's Kansan grandparents hailed from but that he knew little of, having grown up in Hawaii and Indonesia and spent his adult years in big cities. Before mostly white audiences, Obama would joke about his name -- rhyming it with "yo mama" -- and test his message about getting past divisions to solve problems.

Obama's advisers have pointed to his success in winning over "downstate" Illinoisans as a sign of his electability, but political analysts question the claim. Obama lost most of downstate Illinois in his Democratic primary race for [U.S. Senate](#) in 2004, and his big win in the general election that year came against [Alan Keyes](#), a black conservative with a Maryland address. In this year's presidential primary, [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) (D-N.Y.) beat Obama in southern Illinois' struggling coal counties, highlighting the same weakness he showed in the coal regions of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Kentucky.

"He certainly has shown a good amount of reach into downstate and southern Illinois, but . . . it has been overstated," said Michael Lawrence, director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University.

To the extent that Obama has penetrated downstate, said Chris Mooney, a political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield, it has been partly a result of his constituent service, a tool he lacks in the presidential campaign. "He was

thinking Illinois from Day One" in Washington, Mooney said. "He has the classic attention to detail of a Chicago politician, the idea that 'we gotta get ours.' "

But Obama's push for support in rural Illinois has also driven his stances on several issues that could complicate his matchup against [Sen. John McCain](#) (R-Ariz.). He is strongly in favor of ethanol, the corn-based biofuel that is being blamed for driving up food prices, and he supports the new farm bill, which McCain says is wasteful and at odds with Obama's call for reforming Washington.

In Obama's telling, he early on viewed downstate Illinois as a proving ground for his belief that the differences among Americans are smaller than they might appear. He describes Illinois in his 2006 book, "The Audacity of Hope," as a "microcosm of the country" and recalls the wonder of his week-long 1997 tour with aide Dan Shomon -- the "miles of cornfields" and roadside vendors with signs such as "Good Deals on Guns and Swords."

Most of all, Obama relished how the region defied stereotypes. After Shomon warned Obama to wear only khakis and polo shirts, "no fancy linen trousers or silk shirts," Obama enjoyed pointing out residents with linen slacks. When Shomon urged him not to request Dijon mustard at a restaurant, the puzzled waitress said she had it.

In the state legislature, Obama befriended rural lawmakers such as Sen. Gary Forby, a conservative Democrat and contractor from a coal county. "We're down-to-earth people, and Barack was down-to-earth people, too," Forby said last week. "What I liked about him was the way he was brought up, that he had never had anything gave to him." Forby is sure that rural Americans will agree: "If people could just talk to him for a few minutes, I don't think there will be an issue."

While other Chicago politicians sometimes travel south, it was obvious to Obama's downstate hosts that he was particularly interested in extending his reach. On the 1997 trip, Obama stopped at the [Applebee's](#) in Carbondale to chat with John Clemons, a lawyer and active Democrat. Six years later, Obama asked Clemons to oversee his U.S. Senate campaign in the area.

Even though one of Obama's rivals, the state comptroller, was favored in rural Illinois, Obama tried for the region, aided by a key endorsement from the daughter of the popular former senator [Paul Simon](#), who died during the race.

Brown, the Chester activist, recalls a visit Obama made to an [American Legion](#) hall in a nearby town where "you'd see these little tiny white ladies posing excitedly [for pictures] with Barack, and he was as comfortable with them as they were with him." In Cairo, a town at the southern tip of the state that had suffered racial strife three decades earlier, Obama was met by a cheering, diverse crowd, a welcome he recounted often on the trail.

But Obama's urban roots were apparent. Clemons recalls that when he asked the campaign to send lawn signs to Carbondale, it instead sent boxes of placards of the sort that city residents could put in their apartment windows. "I said, 'You need the metal things to stick in the ground!' " he said. "They learned a few things."

Obama ran away with the primary, winning 52 percent of the vote in a crowded field. But he fared less well in rural Illinois, losing 88 of the state's 102 counties.

He pressed on with the downstate outreach in the general election. Buddy Maupin, a regional director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, recalled that when Obama came south to visit the intimidating Big Muddy River prison, he asked to tour it apart from the other top officials who were along, so that he could speak with prison employees directly.

The outreach had limits. When several union leaders urged Obama to go on a duck-hunting trip downstate, a common routine for Illinois politicians, Obama refused, to the surprise of the union bosses. "He said, 'I'm not a duck hunter, and I'm not going to pretend to be something I'm not,' " Maupin said.

After Republican [Jack Ryan](#) quit the race over revelations from his divorce filings and his party could find only Keyes to replace him, Obama carried all but nine counties. But this was not proof of rural appeal, given his weak opponent, Mooney said: "It's not that he's not good with others, but the 2004 election is not evidence that he's good at connecting with the rural white guy."

Despite arriving in Washington as a celebrity, Obama kept his focus back home. He held town meetings, hired respected downstaters for his staff, and picked fights for more veterans' health funding for Illinois and for upgrading locks on the

Illinois and Mississippi rivers.

But his drive for support downstate also opened him to criticism that he was engaging in some of the "old politics" he decries, as he sided with some powerful state interests. After voting in 2005 against a Bush administration loosening of pollution rules, Obama sought to regain favor with the coal industry by coming out for huge subsidies for liquefying coal for transportation fuel, irking environmentalists who noted that this would increase carbon dioxide emissions. He backed away last year, leaving both sides unsure where he stood.

His support for the new farm bill won praise from lobbying groups such as the Farm Bureau. But Dan Owens of the Center for Rural Affairs, a group opposed to the bill, lamented that a reform-minded senator such as Obama did not realize that many farmers would support a politician who built a case against the subsidy system. "It's just the typical political calculation that most elected officials make," Owens said.

Against Clinton this year, Obama prevailed in most of his state's farm country, paralleling his strong performance in farm states such as Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska. Even in southern Illinois, where Clinton won 14 counties, Obama has acquired a basic familiarity that he still lacks in key swing states such as Ohio, where it is easy to find voters who voice false rumors about his religion or his patriotism.

He prevailed against Clinton in Chester, a former coal town of 7,800 whose economy now relies on a prison and mental health facility, with the only major private enterprise a company that makes cake mix and microwave popcorn, and tourist business generated by Chester's status as the home of "Popeye." Outside a grocery store, June Cash, the wife of a retired minister, said she preferred Clinton but would back Obama over McCain.

"I still don't know if he's got what it takes to run this country," she said. But, she added, "I don't want the same thing we've been having."

Will Harris, an auto mechanic, has come around to Obama. "I'm sick of the lobbying and bull crap in Washington," he said. "I feel like he's someone who would fight for a small-business owner like me instead of a bunch of lobbyists. I hope I'm right."

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