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How McCain Thinks He Can Win Pennsylvania

By Sean Scully / Philadelphia

With several once reliably red states like Colorado, Nevada and Virginia leaning perilously blue, John McCain urgently needs to win at least one big blue state on Election Day. And that state, he hopes, is Pennsylvania.

At first glance, the Keystone State doesn't seem like an obvious target for McCain and his running mate, Alaska governor Sarah Palin. Pennsylvania has been a reliably Democratic state in the past four presidential elections, it now has a million more registered Democrats than Republicans, and Obama can depend on strong support in its two biggest cities, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Polls show the Democratic nominee with a commanding lead of anywhere from 7 to 14 points in the state, up from a near tie in mid-September.

But it's clear to observers on both sides of the political aisle that much of Barack Obama's support may be soft, leaving him potentially vulnerable here. He lost the April primary contest to Hillary Clinton by 10 points, and even the state's Democratic governor, Ed Rendell, has said there are many culturally conservative voters who would have a hard time embracing a black man as President. McCain's campaign says its internal polling shows the gap between the two nominees to be 3 or 4 percentage points closer than the polls, putting McCain theoretically within striking distance in the past week. "It's do or die — this is his last stand, because he's got no other place to go ... This is a forced choice. This is not an option," said pollster and political analyst G. Terry Madonna of Franklin & Marshall College.

McCain has poured money and energy into the state in the final weeks, spending three critical days in mid-October here and hammering Obama as Barack the Redistributionist, an old-fashioned tax-and-spend liberal who wants to "spread the wealth around" and can't be trusted on national security. McCain was back in Pennsylvania earlier this week, while Palin arrived for a series of appearances on Tuesday. Both are likely to visit again before Election Day. "It's wonderful to fool the pundits, because we're going to win in Pennsylvania," McCain told supporters in Hershey on Tuesday.

Democrats say they remain confident, but there are clear undercurrents of concern. Governor Rendell and party officials have asked Obama to spend more time in the state to counter the McCain offensive, and indeed the Democrat has made appearances in both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia over the past couple of days to make his closing arguments. "John McCain's ridden shotgun as George Bush's driven this economy towards a cliff, and now he wants to take the wheel and step on the gas," the Illinois Senator told a wet crowd of 9,000 outside of Philadelphia on Tuesday.

At Rendell's recent prodding, Bill Clinton is campaigning in western and central Pennsylvania on

Wednesday. And Rendell himself has been campaigning relentlessly, particularly in the western part of the state, including an appearance with Hillary Clinton last week.

It's no coincidence that Rendell and the Clintons have been stumping on Obama's behalf in the western and central parts of the state, where a vast swath of rural areas and aging industrial towns have earned it the nickname Pennsylvtucky. [Clinton defeated Obama](#) by racking up votes in this more culturally conservative region, including the suburbs of Pittsburgh, where Obama's ill-advised comments earlier this year about [voters being "bitter" and clinging to "guns or religion"](#) still elicit anger. It's also here where McCain will have to beat Obama by a huge margin to have any chance at pulling an upset. McCain has deployed running mate Palin, a favorite among conservatives, to make at least four appearances in the area this week.

But even if the West were to go for McCain, he would still need a strong turnout — though not necessarily an outright victory — in the suburbs of Philadelphia like Downingtown, Blue Bell, Yardley and Bensalem, which are traditionally Republican-friendly, but have been trending Democratic for a decade. Though he has spent most of the campaign appealing to the conservative base, McCain has been sure to highlight his maverick streaks to appeal to more moderate Republicans and independents in this area.

Democrats are keenly aware of this math and have been focusing money and time in the Philadelphia area, including Obama's appearance on Tuesday, likely to be his last in the state. Rendell, who himself swept to victory in his first term with a blowout win in the Philadelphia suburbs, said he's confident that Obama will hold those southeastern counties strongly. Turnout in the Philadelphia area might be large enough to make sure Obama is "unbeatable in the state even if the bottom fell out [in the west]," he told TIME. "And I don't think the bottom will fall out."

Even in the more conservative Western areas of Pennsylvania, however, Democrats think they may draw enough voters to prevent a McCain sweep in the rural counties. If nothing else, the economy has neutralized many of the social issues that might have drawn some Democrats and independents to McCain. "When you look at a meltdown of the economy, people sort of suspend the question of whether there is a lock on a gun or something and really focus on what's happening here," said Clifford B. Levine, a Pittsburgh attorney and chairman of Obama's Western Pennsylvania steering committee.

But for all the polls and conventional political activity, there is a factor in this campaign and this state that is unlike any before it — race. During the seemingly endless primary campaign here last spring, Rendell, a Clinton supporter, drew criticism when he said "some whites are probably not ready to vote for an African-American candidate." Congressman John Murtha, who represents a rural swath of Western Pennsylvania, put it even more bluntly earlier this month when he called his region "racist" in an interview with the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*. The veteran Democrat later backed off just a bit, noting that the district used to be "really redneck."

And Philadelphia *Daily News* columnist John Baer set off a storm of angry letters last week when he wrote about the "Cracker Factor" in the campaign, saying McCain was angling to attract white voters who wouldn't vote for a black candidate.

"Pennsylvania is a lot whiter than California or Virginia, and older and home to, percentage-wise, more native-born residents, folks who don't much like change," Baer wrote on Oct. 21. "And I believe there's a 'cracker factor' — we've never elected a black nonjudicial statewide candidate — and I believe that's why McCain is here." Former Gov. Tom Ridge, a McCain supporter, dismisses talk that the election will turn predominantly on race, saying Rendell and Murtha and others "characterize the state unfairly."

"If [Obama] loses in Western Pennsylvania, which he could, I don't think it has anything to do with race," Ridge said. "I think he just is way, way out of the mainstream of Republican and Democrat thinking in that part of the state." The McCain campaign just has to hope he is far enough out of the mainstream for its candidate to steal the state.

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