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Appalachian Heritage, Volume 36, Number 2, Spring 2008, pp. 6-7 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.0.0009>



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THIS SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

George Brosi

I may be wrong, but I think we should brace ourselves for another “discovery” of Appalachia. Politics has often been the driving force behind attention to the region. We were first “discovered” during the Civil War Era, when support for the Republican Party and the Union cause in the region was crucial politically to the future of the whole country. One of the most significant times we were “rediscovered” was in 1960 when Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy fought it out in the West Virginia Democrat primary. The result galvanized a generation of young people to serve their country, particularly in our region. The 2008 Presidential primaries have, so far, again dramatically demonstrated our region’s distinctiveness and importance.

This magazine is going to press right after the Mississippi primary and before the Pennsylvania primary, so everything I say here may be disproved by the time you read it. However, I suspect that the coming primaries in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, West Virginia, and Kentucky, as well as the general election, will likely bring significant media attention to our region. We probably will see another round, perhaps huge, perhaps relatively short-lived, of awareness about Appalachia in 2008.

On March 4 Mike Huckabee conceded victory to John McCain in the Republican Primary. That same day, McCain won the Ohio primary by a margin of 60 percent to 31 percent, but in Scioto County in the Appalachian corner of the state, his margin of victory was 54 percent to 42 percent a much stronger showing for Huckabee. Earlier in that race, Huckabee won West Virginia’s Republican contest and did exceptionally well in the Appalachian sections of other states.

On the Democrat side, the contrast between Appalachia and the rest of the country is even more dramatic. As this magazine goes to press, Barack Obama is the frontrunner with a majority of states and a majority of the popular vote, but his rival, Hillary Clinton, has trounced him in Appalachia.

Barack Obama won Virginia by a margin of 64 percent–35 percent. However, in Buchanan County, Clinton beat him ten times over, 90 percent to 9 percent. Tennessee bucked the national trend and supported Clinton. Obama got 41 percent of the state-wide total but only 7 percent in Grundy County. In a March 6 blog on DailyKos, “faithful” calculated that Obama “under performed” in Appalachian Tennessee by 41 percent and in Appalachian Virginia by 61 percent. Even the Appalachian regions of Maryland and South Carolina and Alabama show that this trend appears to be consistent all the way to the very edges of Appalachia. The apparent wisdom of the ARC in adding the mole-hills of northeastern Mississippi to the region has finally been reinforced by the election returns. Obama won with over 60 percent of the state-wide totals in Mississippi, but barely managed percentages in the teens in most of the ARC counties. The contrast between Appalachia and the rest of the country is dramatic, and shows that this is much more than a rural/urban split. For example, Obama’s *worst* performance in any of Wisconsin’s counties was in rural Douglas county, but there he garnered 42 percent of the vote.

Since 1978 when Henry D. Shapiro published *Appalachia on Our Mind*, some have argued that Appalachia is an intellectual construct with little real meaning. The primary elections in 2008 have demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that our region is distinctive.

All who care about Appalachia, regardless of political inclinations, will need to be prepared to respond to the coming media onslaught on two levels. Whether we are scholars or service workers or entrepreneurs, first, we’ll need to learn from the insights that the election results provide us about the population we serve. We’ll have to recalculate and recalibrate what this means in our everyday work. Secondly, we’ll need to strategize about how to take advantage of the opportunities that this new-found attention to the region brings us.

Of course we always need to be thoughtful and reflective about our work. This year, however, we are likely to be caught up in a political whirlwind that demonstrates regional distinctiveness quite dramatically. The media may well choose to emphasize this phenomenon. We need to be prepared to make the most of it.