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Electoracle / McCain campaign vows to fight in NJ despite poll numbers

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Republican presidential nominee John McCain may be cutting his losses in Michigan, but his campaign and supporters say he has no intentions of pulling out of Democrat-leaning New Jersey.

McCain confirmed Oct. 2 that he would cut spending and move paid staffers out of Michigan to put resources to better use in more competitive states. Polls showed McCain about 10 points behind Democrat Barack Obama in Michigan.

A Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind poll last week found Obama ahead in New Jersey by 13 points.

But the McCain folks said they are staying put in the Garden State and are targeting blue-collar Democrats and independents who voted for Republican Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. McCain spokesman Peter Feldman said that despite the polls, the campaign thinks the state's voters still harbor doubts about Obama and can still be persuaded.

"Of course New Jersey is still winnable," added state Sen. Bill Baroni, R-Mercer, chair of the state McCain campaign.

"Those Reagan Democrats and swing voters decide every election in New Jersey, from a mayoral race to president of the United States," Baroni said. "John McCain has special appeal to those voters."

Feldman said the campaign never considered pulling resources out of this state, which has 15 Electoral College votes. Feldman said McCain's Woodbridge office is still open, and volunteers are signing up across the state. McCain has five full-time paid staffers here. Obama reportedly has 25.

Atlantic County Republican Chairman Keith Davis said New Jersey is different than Michigan in that local TV markets cut across state boundaries. Ads purchased on Philadelphia TV are seen in the southern part of the state. A recent Press of Atlantic City-Richard Stockton College poll showed McCain and Obama tied in this region. Davis said McCain can win over southern New Jersey voters who watch campaign ads aimed at voters in battleground Pennsylvania.

Davis cited signs of commitment by McCain to this region. His running-mate, "hockey mom" Sarah Palin, dropped the first puck at the Philadelphia Flyers' home opener Saturday night. Michael DuHaime, McCain's political director and a former New Jersey Republican official, will attend a fundraiser in Monmouth County on Thursday, Davis said.

He said voters are being reminded of New Jersey's political corruption by the ongoing graft trial of state Sen. Wayne Briant, D-Camden.

"I think the McCain message of reform resonates with New Jersey voters who are tired of corruption," Davis said.

"People in the McCain camp feel we can make headway here and that the electorate is still fluid. I don't think Barack Obama has sealed the deal," he said.

State Democrats have said repeatedly they are happy to watch Republicans spend resources in a state that has voted Democratic for president, U.S. Senate and governor for years. They predict New Jersey will go to Obama.

Baroni said Republicans knew it would be an uphill battle. But he said he feels comfortable with their plan and confident McCain is in New Jersey for the duration.

"In February, John McCain told me directly on the Straight Talk Express to build a grass-roots campaign here, and that's what we've done," Baroni said.

Pose a question

The Press of Atlantic City and Richard Stockton College of New Jersey are cosponsoring a debate between Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd, and Democratic challenger David Kurkowski. Press readers are invited to pose some of the debate questions.

Questions should be directed to both candidates. There are several ways to send questions in. E-mail them to politics@pressofac.com. Fax them to 609-569-7536. If fax and e-mail are not options, call 609-272-7273. Include your name, hometown and contact information.

The public is invited to attend the one-hour debate, scheduled for 7 p.m. Monday, Oct. 20, in the G-wing student lounge on the Stockton campus in Galloway Township.

Party building

A different kind of political mailer arrived in Atlantic County mailboxes recently. It didn't attack an opponent. In fact, it didn't even mention any candidates.

The front of the mailer showed a racially diverse group of people beneath the heading: "If we really want to change our government, we need to change the type of people we elect." Inside, it said, "We need your voice. Join the Democratic Party's campaign for change."

The Atlantic County Democratic Committee, which mailed out the flyers countywide, is trying to build a farm team of party workers and candidates for office. The party is attempting to capitalize locally on the excitement generated by this year's presidential election.

"The race for president isn't the only important election," the mailer said. "The leaders we choose at the local, county and state levels have a direct impact on our quality of life - whether it's Township Committee or state Legislature."

County Democratic Chairman Patrick D'Arcy said the committee has gotten many calls during this intense presidential election from people interested in volunteering.

"They want to get involved, but just don't know how," he said.

The flyer includes a mail-in card on which recipients can check boxes to join the party, volunteer to work or express interest in running for office. The effort is reminiscent of the Camden County Democratic Committee's efforts more than a decade ago to recruit ordinary citizens to run for political office.

