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Campaign 2008

Poor, hungry and ready to vote in Ohio

Many see a chance to improve their daily lives by turning out for presidential election

By Tim Jones

Tribune correspondent

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LOGAN, [Ohio](#) — Steven Klinger rolled his rusted tan pickup truck to a stop on a cold morning, shutting off the engine at 4 a.m. After wrapping himself in a bright green blanket, he gazed at his girlfriend's photo dangling from the rearview mirror, snuggled deep into the driver's seat and waited 4 1/2 hours for the food pantry to open.

Fifteen cars were ahead of Klinger on this Monday, and by the time the sun peeked over the trees about 200 vehicles had lined up behind him, straddling the gravel berm and the potholed highway for nearly 2 miles. Scores of other vehicles would arrive in the next few hours, stretching the caravan's length.

Twice a month, every month, cars line up to get a box of food from the wooden pallets at the Smith Chapel Food Pantry in this gray southeast Ohio town. The only thing that changes is that the lines and the wait get longer and, alarmingly, the food gets scarcer.

All but forgotten in the compulsory presidential campaign pledges to fight for the middle class is the plight of growing numbers of people like Klinger and the crumbling system in Ohio that is designed to help 1.5 million residents whose status falls several rungs short of middle class.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, executive director of the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks, said recently that the state's emergency food network "is on the verge of collapsing under unprecedented demand." Food donations, from private and government sources, are down, and in November, 1.1 million Ohioans received food stamps, the highest number in the state's history.

But something unusual is happening in this vehicular food line, and it's not confined to the immediate issue of feeding families or worrying that the food boxes will be gone before the cars reach the front of the line. Low-income people who are less inclined to vote are talking with a new urgency about the importance of the presidential race and how it could affect their daily lives.

Most express an interest in the Democrats, and more in [Barack Obama](#) than [Hillary Clinton](#). The vote is



for dramatic change.

"This isn't like four years ago, when I wasn't paying any attention," said Betty Dowden, sitting behind the wheel of an 18-year-old Buick LeSabre, careful to keep the windows up and the heat inside the car while her 11-month-old son, Lucas, slept in the back seat.

"I wasn't really into politics, but I truly believe we're headed into a depression," said Dowden, who suffers from cystic fibrosis and recently lost her job at a Wendy's restaurant. "It is desperate. Somebody has to make a difference."

Strong interest?

Studies have shown a correlation between income and voting habits, with the more affluent being the most consistent voters. Statistics and anecdotal evidence, however, suggest strong interest in Tuesday's Ohio primary among low-income voters, who historically have been less likely to go to the ballot box.

County election boards report dramatically higher registration numbers. In Hocking County, where Logan is the seat of government, absentee ballots are up almost 250 percent over the 2004 primary, and Lisa Schwartze, the election board chairwoman, predicts turnout Tuesday will be 40 percent, up from 30 percent in 2004.

In neighboring Athens County, which has a poverty rate of 30 percent, Jack Frech, director of the county's Department of Job and Family Services, said voter registrations at his office more than quadrupled the normal traffic in January.

"I think people have drawn the connection between their problems—health care, the price of gas, losing their job, the cost of the war, the tattered social safety net—and the government," Frech said. "If we as a country saw people someplace else waiting in line for five hours for food like they do here, we'd call that a human-rights violation."

That is not to say the proletariat is about to rise up and shake the established political order. But surprisingly strong turnouts in earlier primary states—beyond what was projected—suggest in part that low-income voters are motivated by the candidates and by economic conditions.

Scant food inventory

That is evident in Logan, where the food warehouse that serves 10 of the poorest counties in the state shut down for four weeks after Christmas because there wasn't enough food to distribute. It reopened a month ago, but the inventory in the Logan repository is still thin.

The scarcity is one reason people show up long before sunrise to pick up a box of canned and packaged food that may last them a week or 10 days.

Before the morning's food distribution began, relatively few drivers kept their engines running continuously, despite the freezing temperatures. Gas costs \$3.15 a gallon, and engines were being run just long enough to get some heat in the car. Franklin Welch, a retired local government worker, turned his pickup's ignition on only when the line started moving at 8:30 a.m.

"I used to tell very few people I was a Democrat, but by God I'm telling everyone this year," Welch said, complaining about health insurance costs that "folks around here making \$5 and \$6 an hour can't

afford."

Ed Smith, a retired carpenter, arrived at 3:30 one morning to pick up food boxes for friends and a relative. "We're not even middle class anymore," Smith said, expressing disgust that former [President Bill Clinton](#), who spoke in Athens and [Lancaster](#), didn't stop in Logan, halfway between, "and realize what's going on here."

Most of the 750 regulars at the food pantry —about 60 percent—are senior citizens, said Danny DeVol, an 81-year-old retired businessman who's been running the pantry for six years. The fastest-growing segment, DeVol said, involves laid-off workers and the working poor, including Klinger, a 49-year-old dishwasher who earns \$5.85 an hour, or \$175 a week for his 30 hours of work.

Sifting through the available food, DeVol said most people will get bread, a few cans of carrots, beans, peas and, on this day, peaches or apricots and some smaller incidentals.

"It's really kind of embarrassing," DeVol said. "It's not much to get after waiting in line for five hours."

tmjones@tribune.com

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