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BYLINE: Jeremy Kahn

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When I was growing up in Ohio, one of the state's perennially lackluster marketing campaigns dubbed the place "the heart of it all." Now, it's true that Ohio is more geographically central than, say, California or New York. And, yes, it does have some legitimate claim to being part of that mythical region known as "the heartland." And, sure, Ohio is home to several popular attractions: the halls of fame (football and rock and roll) and Cedar Point, an amusement park boasting some of the world's tallest, fastest roller coasters. But "the heart of it all"? Who were they trying to kid? Throughout my childhood, Ohio remained the sort of place that people who lived in other parts of the country drove through, or flew over, on their way somewhere else.

Attending college on the East Coast, I found that many of my classmates--experts on the subtle class distinctions between Long Island towns and able to exchange knowing nods at the mention of certain New Jersey Turnpike exits--seemed only dimly aware of where Ohio was. "It borders Illinois, right?" Well, no. And there were frequent mix-ups about my hometown. "You're from Cincinnati right? No, wait, don't tell me. Columbus." Cleveland. I'm from Cleveland.

But this year's presidential election has made "the heart of it all" seem like more than wishful thinking. Karl Rove has called Ohio the campaign's "ground zero." Numerous pundits have proclaimed that "Ohio is the new Florida," the place where the election will be decided. As a result, Ohioans are basking in an unusual amount of national attention. George W. Bush and Dick Cheney have spent 15 days in the state since May, John Kerry and John Edwards 21. Ohio holds three of the four TV markets with the highest volume of campaign advertising. Armies of canvassers have descended on the state to register hundreds of thousands of voters. And Cleveland's Case Western Reserve University was the site of Tuesday's vice-presidential debate.

This is heady stuff. Ohioans have always been proud of their place in national politics. The state claims eight presidents as native sons. And, for decades, with its mix of industry and agriculture, the state's demographics closely tracked the rest of the country's, making Ohio an important bellwether. It has sided with the winner in every presidential election since 1964, and no Republican has ever won the presidency without carrying Ohio, a fact that is not lost on Rove.

So, suddenly, it's cool to be from Ohio--much to the wonderment of Ohioans and the bemusement of people elsewhere. People from solid red or blue states, their individual votes rendered meaningless by the

electoral college, regard Ohioans with envy. And friends in Washington, D.C., and New York suddenly seem to know more about Ohio geography than I do, peppering me with questions about unemployed factory workers in Chillicothe and security moms in Cuyahoga Falls. And Ohioans get the pleasure of seeing the candidates pander to their parochial interests, such as when Kerry criticized Bush's decision to end steel tariffs in Austintown this week.

In Washington, it is easy to think of the campaign as something distant, because it largely is. But, during a recent visit home to the leafy Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, I was surprised to see the battle for Ohio being waged on my very block. Bush-Cheney and Kerry-Edwards signs dueled in our neighbors' yards--still a jarring site in a suburb that prohibited lawn signs of any kind until 1995, after federal courts declared such bans unconstitutional. My parents reported they were under pressure to make a similar declaration of loyalty. Democratic fund-raisers called daily seeking contributions. And, every time I turned on the television, I was bombarded by the latest Bush and Kerry ads, none of which I had ever seen in Washington.

Here in Northeast Ohio, which is the most reliably Democratic part of the state, there is an understandable fear that Ohio might once again back Bush, who carried it in 2000 by just 3.5 percent. For a time, Democrats thought Ohio would be easy pickings for Kerry. In 2000, the race narrowed dramatically in the 72 hours before the election, even though Al Gore had all but abandoned the state that fall. And, since Bush was elected, the state has lost more than 230,000 jobs. It had the worst job performance of any state except Michigan last year. But, despite this natural advantage, Kerry has struggled. Most polls show a slight Bush lead.

Beyond the simple fear that Bush might win, conversations with family friends revealed another, deeper insecurity: that Ohio would somehow bungle its moment in the spotlight, that it would reveal itself not as a national bellwether but as economically and culturally backward. Clevelanders, who desperately hoped their city had finally shaken off its Rust Belt reputation during a brief urban renaissance in the '90s, are embarrassed that it has just been named the most impoverished big city in America. And there is outrage at Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell, a Republican who, for a time, insisted that no registration forms would be accepted unless they were printed on 80-pound paper stock, and who is trying to prohibit provisional ballots from being cast by voters who go to the wrong polling places. There are also rueful discussions of Ohio's ballot initiative number one, which would amend the state's constitution to prohibit not only gay marriages, but civil unions as well. The initiative has drawn criticism from gay rights proponents and the state's big-city mayors, who fear the loss of business. It will probably pass any way.

Tellingly, there are even a few people who want the election to be over already so Ohio can be just Ohio again. Cleveland Mayor Jane Campbell last week joined other swing-state mayors in announcing that she plans to bill the Bush and Kerry campaigns \$270,000 for security and other costs from nine campaign visits in the last six months. Campbell told USA Today, "This is a national election. The cost ought to be borne by the federal government, not city governments that have the misfortune of being in swing states." Misfortune? Most Ohioans wouldn't

characterize it that way. We know you only love us for our electoral votes, but we're flattered to finally be at the heart of it all.

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