Obama seeks repeat with young Florida voters; Republicans try to chip away at his support

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

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CORAL GABLES

– If the rapturous, mostly college-aged crowd that gave a President Barack Obama a rah-rah reception here on Thursday foreshadows real-world political results in November, the next eight months of campaigning won't matter. He'll win re-election in a landslide.

Fortunately for Republicans, the outlook isn't that rosy for Obama — or dire for their party.

The numbers of young voters in play are theoretically large enough to determine the outcome of the election as a whole. In Florida, the most populous swing state up for grabs, there are more than 840,000 college and university students. In 2008, Obama won the state by just 236,450 votes.

Political experts, polling data and students themselves say the 18 to 20-somethings inside and outside Florida are likely to support Obama. But they question whether the Democratic incumbent can generate the same passion as four years ago, when he was seen as a once-in-a-generation transformational figure by many.

"My age bracket is going to end up going heavily for him again," predicted Ashley Anastasi, 20, a Florida Atlantic University sophomore, who's working to prevent that as president of her school's College Republicans.

True enough, Obama received a raucous welcome on Thursday afternoon from the nearly 1,500 people, most of them students, who packed the University of Miami's BankUnited Center Fieldhouse to hear him speak after a stop at the College of Engineering. The president worked hard to connect, holding his hands together in the form of the university's "U" symbol and observing, "I don't know how you guys go to class. I'm assuming you do go to class. It's just too nice outside."

He also used challenging rhetoric evocative of President John F. Kennedy's New Frontier.

"I need you guys to work hard. I need you guys to dream big," Obama said. "We've got to summon the spirit of optimism and that willingness to tackle tough problems that led previous generations to meet the challenges of their times — to power a nation from coast to coast, to
send a man to the moon, to connect an entire world with our own science and our own imagination."

Just as true, however: the largely pro-Obama crowd here didn't necessarily presage what's happening with Florida's youth vote as a whole.

For instance, in a Jan. 31 mock election at Nova Southeastern University's Shepard Broad Law Center in Davie, 307 students, faculty and staff gave 54 percent of the vote to Obama, while the four rival Republican presidential candidates weren't far behind with a combined 46 percent. Analysts said Obama needs to do better than that with young voters.

"It's close to impossible to repeat 2008," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University. "The problem with being a candidate and being a president is you can say a lot of aspirational things as a candidate that are very hard to accomplish as an actual president."

Enlisting the support of young Americans was a pivotal element of Obama's winning coalition in 2008, and has emerged as a key component in his strategy for earning a second term as well.

University of Miami President Donna Shalala, Obama's official campus host, said the president needs to keep visiting college campuses and talking to students about more than just student loans.

"This political year is about the future. What kind of jobs they're going to have in the future, what kind of life they're going to have in the future," said Shalala, who served in the Cabinet of another Democratic president, Bill Clinton.

At UM, many students were thrilled to see Obama. "This is a huge deal. This is all anybody's talking about," said Emily Young, 20, a sophomore from Jacksonville. Senior Joshua Gray, 23, termed the visit "monumental."

Still, recapturing the excitement that propelled the youth vote to record-busting levels in 2008 nationwide mean such scenes must repeat again and again – along with a dose of good economic news, smart messaging and effective efforts to get students registered and to the polls.

Gray, an Atlanta resident who volunteered for Obama in 2008, thinks his candidate is going to be a tougher sell now. "This year is definitely going to be a little tricky," he said.

Obama's visit to South Florida wasn't purely a play for the youth vote. The main topic of the 23-minute televised speech the president gave at the University of Miami was energy, an important campaign issue. With gasoline prices rising, he tried to parry Republican attacks that his administration's policy in the area has failed.

The rest of the day's agenda included a fundraising reception at the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables; a high-dollar fundraising event at the home of Chris Korge, a prominent South Florida lawyer, and a third fundraiser in Orlando.
Anastasi, who is secretary of the Florida Federation of College Republicans, said her party isn't ceding young voters to Obama. She thinks her party's eventual nominee will do better in 2012 than Sen. John McCain did in 2008.

"There's definitely room for the Republicans to come in and snag people," she said.

College Republicans said they have an Operation Red November strategy planned to spread the party's message across the state beginning in August, when students return to class.

Organizing and tactics aside, Republicans are already motivating young voters — but to Obama's benefit, claimed Boris Bastidas, president of FAU's College Democrats.

"What is the opposition going to be offering?" Bastidas asked. "If they're coming out and saying no to the Dream Act [to permit legal status for illegal immigrants serving in the military or getting a college degree]? If they're coming out and saying no to birth control? If they're coming out and saying no to gay rights and abortion rights? Those social issues tend to get young people pretty riled up."

Casey Mullin, president of the Democratic Law Student Council at Nova Southeastern, said Obama needs to remind young voters what he's done.

College students like the end to the war in Iraq and plans to wind down in Afghanistan, Mullin said. And the health care overhaul, derided by Republicans as Obamacare, has provided tangible benefits to students like him, Mullin said. At 24, he said he's now able to continue getting coverage through his parents' health insurance.

While Republicans still are debating who their presidential candidate should be, pro-Obama campaign activities are gearing up at campuses throughout the state, said Dominique Gelin, president of Florida College Democrats and a senior at the University of Central Florida.

"We just have to make sure that we're reaching out to our classmates in a way that we know we can and amplify his message," Gelin said. "We even have students at Florida Gulf Coast University, and that's a red part of the state."

For the Democrats, voter registration is a priority, including events this week at FAU's Boca Raton campus and next week at Nova. Many college students have never registered. This fall, the pro-Obama camp plans to urge students to vote by mail.

The degree of success the president's supporters achieve could determine who wins Florida. "The Republicans don't rely on the youth vote and the Democrats need a strong youth vote," Wagner said.