

Beyond Black Politics

By ABIGAIL THERNSTROM

African-Americans voting for Barack Obama are understandably proud of a candidate who is such an electrifying presence on the national political stage. But he has no black company on that same stage. Not a single other member of the Congressional Black Caucus would have had a smidgen of a chance at winning the Democratic nomination. None could have put together Mr. Obama's strong biracial coalition. How come?

The Illinois senator is not the typical black member of Congress. Perhaps partly for that reason, prominent members of the African-American political elite did not initially expect such excitement from black voters. At the start of the campaign, at least some black opinion makers saw Mr. Obama as not quite authentically black -- a man who, as prominent writer Debra Dickerson put it, might "go Tiger Woods on us and get all race transcendent." Ms. Dickerson was reluctant, she said, "to point out the obvious: Obama isn't black."

It wasn't a new issue. In 2000, when former Black Panther member Bobby Rush crushed Mr. Obama in a U.S. House election in Illinois, a consultant to the Rush campaign told a New York Times reporter that Mr. Obama was seen as "not from us, not from the 'hood." Despite his community organizing, he was too Harvard.

Finally, all Democrats -- whatever their color -- want a winner. Only when white voters in Iowa gave Mr. Obama his first victory on Jan. 3 were black voters persuaded they would not be wasting their ballot by backing him. Thus, in the Jan. 26 South Carolina primary, Mr. Obama got 78% of the African-American vote. A month later, civil-rights icon and Georgia congressman John Lewis was unable to ignore his state's 88% black support Mr. Obama, and abandoned his long-standing loyalty to the Clintons. Mr. Obama's share of the black vote dropped below 70% only in Massachusetts and New York, and in numerous states it hovered around 90%.

By now, with Barack Obama well on his way to clinching the Democratic Party nomination, there's an obvious question: If he can make such a serious bid for the presidency, why have so few blacks tried to gain public office in majority-white settings, that would have been far less challenging?

There have been few black U.S. senators -- but aspiring politicians cannot win elections in which they do not run. The same rule applies to House seats. It's often noted that the vast majority of black members of Congress are elected from majority-black districts. That does not mean, however, that black candidates will almost inevitably lose in most predominantly white constituencies.

Black candidates, however, seldom take the risk of wandering into political territory where, in Justice David Souter's words, they are obligated "to pull, haul, and trade to find common political ground" with voters outside the group. There is no way of knowing how well a candidate with Mr. Obama's personality and style would have done in many majority-white constituencies, even in the South.

That is, of course, the catch: Barack Obama has done so well precisely because he is a different sort of black candidate. Most black politicians do not have the personal history that has allowed Mr. Obama to "find common political ground." They have also been groomed in majority-black districts where they have seldom needed to appeal across racial lines.

"The Voting Rights Act perplexingly integrates the Congress by separating people into different congressional districts on the basis of race," political scientist David Lublin has noted. The statute has conferred on minority candidates a unique privilege: protection from white competition. In theory, there are no group rights to representation in America. In fact, the 1965 statute has created a system of reserved seats for blacks and Hispanics.

Almost all members of the Congressional Black Caucus have been elected to fill a reserved seat. They run in what Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has called "segregated" districts. These are districts devoid of the normal political pressures that encourage candidates to move to the political center. Candidates win -- as Bobby Rush did -- by emphasizing their racial bona fides, their commitment to representing black interests, and their far-left convictions -- matching those of most black voters. It is not a recipe for winning in statewide and other majority-white settings.

Thanks to the Voting Rights Act, blacks have advanced in one very important sense: At every level of government they hold elected office, and in the South the race-driven districting was initially essential to that dramatic and rapid expansion in black officeholding. But majority-minority districts have also placed blacks in a world of limited political possibilities.

Perhaps the candidacy of Barack Obama can convince the black leadership, as well as the Justice Department attorneys and judges who enforce and interpret the Voting Rights Act, that it is time to move on. Barack Obama, in turning his back on the world of segregated politics, has shown the way forward.

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A18

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