

## **Is race out of the race?**

### **White voters' support for Obama suggests a dramatic change in the electorate.**

By Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom  
March 02, 2008

One of the most notable -- yet unremarked-on -- lessons of this year's Democratic presidential nominating contest is the demolition of the long-held belief that whites simply won't vote for black candidates for higher office. Before the Iowa caucuses on Jan. 3, who could have predicted the remarkable outpouring of white support for Sen. Barack Obama?

As recently as 2006, when Congress held hearings on the renewal of the expiring parts of the Voting Rights Act, civil rights advocates delivered a united message, echoed by the House Judiciary Committee. "It is rare that white voters will cross over to elect minority preferred candidates," the committee's report concluded -- a statement from which there was no congressional dissent.

The 43 members of the Congressional Black Caucus, it seemed, were living proof of this. Overwhelmingly, they had been elected in "majority-minority" districts drawn specifically for African American candidates; only a handful had been elected in districts in which most voters were not black or some combination of black and Latino.

So it's not surprising that, as the 2008 presidential race got underway, many observers -- white and African American alike -- thought Obama's chances of winning the Democratic nomination were very poor. Robert Ford, a black state senator in South Carolina, for instance, told a Time magazine reporter in January 2007 that "Obama would need 43% of the white vote in some states to win, and that's humanly impossible." Southern blacks "don't believe this country is ready to vote for a black president," he added. Jesse Jackson argued that "a white female has an advantage over a black male." And after the first three contests, political scientist Philip Klinkner was ready to say that there was a "ceiling" on white support for Obama of about 35%.

Polling data suggested otherwise. In 2003, for instance, only 7% of Americans said they were unwilling to vote for a "qualified African American candidate," according to a Gallup Organization survey. But many analysts refused to believe such polls, preferring to note racism's long history in American politics or to suggest that white voters were not telling the truth to pollsters.

After nearly two dozen primaries, we now know beyond dispute that the pessimists were wrong. Obama won the majority of white votes in Virginia, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Illinois and Utah, and he received extremely high vote totals among whites in the other states he's run in as well.

Forget, for a moment, about white women, many of whom have been drawn to Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton through a strong sense of sisterhood. Look instead at white men. In a remarkable number of states, according to exit polls, Obama won more than 40% of the white male vote. Those states included Clinton's home state of New York (where Obama got 43%), Arizona (45%) and, most remarkably, the Deep South state of Georgia (46%). Indeed, in Connecticut, New Mexico, Illinois, California, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin, his support from white men was in the quite amazing range of 56% to 64%.

What's more, Obama would probably have won similar levels of support from white female voters -- if he hadn't ended up in a race against a woman. After all, there's no evidence to suggest that white women are less likely to vote for an African American candidate than white men are. If Clinton weren't running (and pulling away votes based on her gender), there's no reason why Obama's numbers among white women wouldn't be as high as his numbers among white men.

The numbers above, of course, do not reflect the entire American electorate. These primaries have been held mostly among Democratic voters, and we don't yet know how Republicans will respond when faced with an African American candidate. Still, the numbers suggest that something has changed dramatically, and that it may be time to rethink some of our most basic assumptions about voters and race.

The Voting Rights Act, 43 years after its original passage, still calls for the creation of majority-minority districts in order to encourage the election of nonwhite candidates. In 1995, awaiting a Supreme Court decision on the constitutionality of racially gerrymandered districts to ensure minority office-holding, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund's Ted Shaw warned: "If we lose these cases, the Congressional Black Caucus will be meeting in the back seat of a taxicab." Rep. Mel Watt, a black Democrat from North Carolina, took the point a step further. "Without these districts," he said, "you're not going to have minority representation in Congress. It's just that simple."

But even then, it wasn't "just that simple." And indeed, when the court struck down the Georgia race-based district in question as unconstitutional -- a geographical "monstrosity," said the court -- African Americans still did very well in the newly configured districts. The Congressional Black Caucus does not meet in a taxicab; it is stronger than ever.

Today, it is even clearer that race has become less of a factor in voting. The high level of white votes for Obama strongly suggests that other black candidates facing overwhelmingly white constituencies can do well.

In 2002, Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) spoke eloquently of racial change in his state. "There has been a transformation. It's a different state, it's a different political climate, it's a different political environment," he said. "It's a different world we live in. ... We have changed. We've come a great

distance. ... It's not just in Georgia but in the American South. I think people are preparing to lay down the burden of race."

The enormous and heartening appeal of Obama among white voters certainly suggests that is the case. Whites refusing to vote for black candidates has finally gone the way of segregated water fountains. Or so we hope.

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