

Is America Ready for Another White Male President?

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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During the Democratic Primaries, when discussing the chances of Obama and Clinton, with some frequency, the person with whom I was talking would lean in towards me and say "Do you really think America is ready for a black/woman president?" Like many people, I found the former question racist and the latter one sexist. As a white man, I also resented the implication that I somehow understood that America wasn't ready, whatever that meant.

Initially, I responded to these questions with anger, but then began to preempt them. Whenever the presidential election came up in discussion, which was about ten times a day, I began the conversation by leaning forward conspiratorially and say "The Republicans have a problem. America is not ready for another white male president." The responses I received were always similar. First a nod of agreement, than a look of confusion that a sputtering response like "you mean Obama I mean black president Clinton woman..."

When I first started doing this, I thought I was just making up a clever response, but as the election approaches, increasingly I believe that I am right in this assessment. During the recently completed primary season, roughly 35 million people voted for somebody who was not a white man. Clinton and Obama's overall vote total far exceeded that of all the white men in the race, for both parties, combined. In the Democratic Party, none of the three highly qualified white men, made it as far as Super Tuesday. Even in the early states when the Republican primary was still competitive and Republican voters could choose from a broad range of conservative white men, the majority of voters eschewed the white male options in both parties and voted for either Clinton or Obama.

I have never been accused of being an optimist, and would never assert that sexism or racism is somehow finished in American politics. Both were evident in full force, overtly and subtly, in the recently completed primary season. The latter will undoubtedly continue to lurk around the edges of the general election between now and November.

Nonetheless, there is increasing reason to believe that these tactics, although sure to be present, will be less effective in 2008. This is partially due to the deep and broad dissatisfaction with the Bush administration as it winds down, and the corresponding profound desire to see change which many Americans feel. It may, however, be due to something beyond that. During the primary season, Obama was able to appeal to an extremely broad swath of the electorate, while maintaining a strong base in several demographic groups as well. His strength in, for example, western states is very unusual for any Democrat, let alone an African American one. His early, and somewhat persistent, support among some Republicans is even more striking. Clinton's strength, in some states, among blue collar white men, was equally impressive.

Attempts to attack Obama through his former pastor, or his church, made far less of an impact than one might have expected, given the racial component to these approaches. Racially tinged criticisms of Michelle Obama have been similarly unsuccessful as have other efforts to portray Obama as the black candidate. Interestingly, the most successful attack on Obama in the primary was probably the attempt to portray him as an elitist. The inaccuracy of that attack notwithstanding, it should be noted that there was no racial component to the one critique that may have hurt him.

The broader political context -- that 2008 is shaping up to be a strongly Democratic year, is not the only factor driving this. Something is changing in American politics. Perhaps all those young people chanting "race doesn't matter" at Obama rallies in the early primary states were telling the truth, at least for many of their generation. While there are certainly still reservoirs of nasty and extreme racism among all age groups, it may be that among young people these views have been relegated to the fringes of political life, and that for many people of that generation race is not an important part of their vote decision.

Another possible explanation is that after a generation of the Democratic Party nominating presidential candidates who are liberal on social issues and who have been consistently attacked by the right as being out of touch with American values and captive of gays, African Americans etc, all of the voters who can be moved by appeals to intolerance have abandoned the Democratic Party years ago. The question of whether or not America is ready for an African American or female president, in addition to being offensive, is also irrelevant. Of course, there are probably many Americans who would not vote for either for president, but that is not how elections are decided. The real question should be are Americans who either voted for, or considered voting for a liberal like John Kerry in 2008 or Al Gore in 2004, ready to vote for an African American or woman candidate. To this question, the answer is an unambiguous yes. Racism is still alive and well in America, it is just effecting fewer vote decisions.

America is not, however, ready to elect another white male president who builds a message of intolerance into his campaign, because there are almost no voters left to pull away from the Democratic Party through appeals of this sort and, more importantly, a substantial number of voters who no longer have the stomach for this kind of campaign. This is particularly true this year. For Senator McCain, this means that he must resist the temptation to go to the well of intolerance, and more importantly, must control the wild cards around his campaign and the myriad independent and semi-independent efforts who might otherwise do this. McCain's campaign is fighting an uphill battle, but they can make it easier for themselves by recognizing just what it is for which America is not ready.