

This Was Never Going to Be Easy

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During the last week or so it seems like the frustration with Obama's inability to expand his lead in the national polls has spread to pro-Obama quarters where supporters are getting nervous as the election approaches. The election is far from over; and it would be surprising if there are many people left who still think Obama has this wrapped up. However, the news is not all bad. Obama, while unable to move decisively ahead, still leads in most national polls, while the state level data still indicates that Obama will likely win the election.

Several things should be kept in mind during the last three months of this election. First, even with Bush approaching record unpopularity, the war in Iraq dragging on and the economy slouching towards depression, the notion that Barack Obama was going to cruise to victory was unrealistic. Obama himself, with characteristic understatement summed up the challenge stating that "It's a leap, electing a 46-year-old black guy named Barack Obama." It is largely because of the disastrous Bush administration that this leap is even possible.

There are more banal reasons other than race why this election was never going to be easy. Obama is in many ways, working hard to buck some reasonably strong historical trends. First, he is seeking to become first non-southern Democratic president since John Kennedy. Second, and related to that point, since Kennedy's 1960 election victory, the Democrats have run a candidate from the Northeast or the Midwest against a Republican candidate from the West or Southwest five times, and have lost all five of these elections. Electing somebody as liberal and Northern as Barack Obama was going to be difficult even if that candidate was a white Protestant with a more "American" sounding name- whatever that means.

While there are clearly reasons other than race why this election was always going to be difficult for Obama, that does not mean that race is not a factor making this an even tougher battle. McCain recently unleashed a barrage of negatives against Barack Obama for allegedly playing the race card. Obama's comment which drew the self righteous ire of the Republican campaign was, referring to how the Republicans were going to run against him, ""Well, you know, he's got a funny name and he doesn't look like all the presidents on the dollar bills and the five-dollar bills."

The controversy these innocuous, and obvious, remarks catalyzed demonstrated that race will remain an important factor, in many ways, in this campaign. As anybody who has lived in the US at any point in the last 232 years knows, race in America is complex. One of the recent complexities is that among white Americans there is a virtual consensus that racism against African Americans is a thing of the past. Anything any African American says or does to challenge this patently false assumption upsets and even angers many white Americans. This is why McCain's campaign, made the strategically clever decision to respond in such an extreme

way to these comments. Successfully, painting Obama as outside the consensus on racism will weaken his appeal to white voters.

This puts Obama in the difficult situation of having to go along with the current white consensus that there is no racism anymore, while running a campaign that recognizes the racial boundaries in which he must operate. One of the ways this can be seen most clearly is in how Obama has confronted his opponents. Increasingly, on progressive blogs and websites, calls for Obama to take off the gloves and respond aggressively with attacks of his own against McCain, can be seen and heard.

The failure to do this, in my view, cost both Kerry and Gore the presidency in 2004 and 2000 respectively. Things are different, however, for Obama. Any aggressive response he makes must recognize the reality of racial politics in America. Obama can only respond to McCain's attacks in measured and conciliatory tones. If he decides to as Senator Chuck Schumer phrased it "hit back hard" Obama risks being seen or described as angry.

While some degree of anger and aggression when attacked is appropriate for most candidates, Obama cannot allow himself to be portrayed, in any way, as angry. Angry Black men do not get a lot of support from white voters, so any hint of anger on Obama's part will be just the opening through which the Republicans will drive a truck. Imagine Republican ads interspersing Obama speaking angrily or pounding his fist, interspersed with images of Reverend Wright or other angry African American figures.

Perhaps once a vice-presidential nominee is chosen, she or he, can take the lead in attacking McCain, or perhaps well known party surrogates can do this, but Obama himself must approach this issue very carefully. Obama's discipline and control on the campaign, while always impressive, are now growing tedious for some voters and losing their impact for others, but he cannot afford to abandon this discipline. This creates additional challenges for his campaign, but this was never going to be easy-and race was always going to be a factor.