

## New Hope for a Color-Blind Society

By James A. Bacon

The election to the presidency of Barack Obama, a biracial man running as a “post racial” candidate, was a transformational event in United States history. Americans finally have an opportunity to transcend what Obama described in March as the “original sin of slavery.” After a 400-year journey through bondage, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights movement, and the fitful, oft-painful integration of blacks into mainstream society, Americans are poised to put that grievous demon behind them.

A Nov. 5 Gallup poll found a surge of optimism that race relations, intractable for so long, had taken a turn for the better: 67 percent of respondents said that relations between blacks and whites would “eventually be worked out” -- up nine percent from only five months previously. That was more progress than the poll had recorded on that question over the previous five *years*.

Obama’s election is also a story of a nation transformed. One reason Obama could get elected on a message of “change” is that the electorate had already undergone its own profound change in attitudes about race. That metamorphosis is not always evident amid the media noise that highlights conflict and amplifies the sensational – the Rodney King beating, the OJ murder trial, the noose incident in Jena, La. But viewed through the prism of generational analysis, the country has come a very long way.

A CNN election exit poll showed a strong correlation between the age of the voter and his or her likelihood to vote for Obama. The GenY (Millennial) generation voted lopsidedly for Obama, by 66% to 32%, while GenX favored him by a solid margin (52% to 46%). Baby Boomers split their votes evenly between Obama and John McCain (50% to 49%), while only the Silent Generation tilted towards McCain (53% McCain, 45% Obama).

Admittedly, the picture is more nuanced than those numbers suggest. One reason that younger voters leaned so strongly toward Obama is that a larger percentage of them belong to traditional Democratic constituencies such as African-Americans, Hispanics and other minorities. (About 30% of GenY is non-white, double the percentage for the Silent generation.) If we narrow the focus to white voters over 30, the generational shift disappears. A consistent percentage of that group -- between 56% and 58% -- selected McCain across the age spectrum.

But there are good reasons to believe that the vast majority of people voted for McCain for reasons other than race. For starters, there was little evidence of the much-feared “Bradley effect,” in which white voters told pollsters they favor a black candidate only to find themselves unable to pull the lever for him in the voting booth. For the most part, according to an MSNBC post-election analysis, people voted for whom they said they would. The phenomenon, said one Harvard scholar, was “a product of a particular political environment that seems to have passed us by.”

Further, according to MSNBC polling data, only seven percent of whites said that race was important in choosing a candidate – and a third of those voted for Obama. Think about that: If only seven percent of whites deemed race a factor, and only two-thirds of those voted against Obama, that implies that, at

most, only 4.5% of whites held Obama's race against him. And they were partially counteracted by the 2.5% of whites who cited race as a factor and voted *for* him.

Lastly, I would note, MSNBC's exit polling data showed a dramatic shift in voting patterns among under-30 white voters: Breaking from their parents, the youngsters favored Obama by 54% to 44%. GenY voters have many reasons to prefer one candidate over another – McCain's age might have hurt him in this demographic -- but race would not appear to be one of them.

The true test will come when today's young children– whatever we decide to call them, GenZ, maybe? -- reach voting age. If my 10-year-old son is any indication, race will be a dead issue by then. My wife and I are raising him to be color blind. He's never betrayed the slightest cognizance of race, other than to note the fact, more as a curiosity than anything, that, gee, some people have dark-colored skin. It's no accident that, while I pulled for McCain and my wife for Clinton this presidential campaign, Jamie was a resolute Obama fan. Surely, a "post racial" society is in our future.

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