
Does Obama Really Have a Race Problem?

There is no doubt that working-class whites harbor resentments against blacks. But wealthy whites are more likely than working-class whites to use the race card in the voting booth.

PETER DREIER | *March 20, 2008* | web only



One of the persistent mantras of this election season is that Barack Obama's skin color may cost him the Democratic nomination (or the White House), because of racism among working-class white voters. According to conventional wisdom, white workers faced with growing economic insecurity -- blue-collar employees in manufacturing and construction, pink-collar employees in office and retail sectors -- vent their frustrations on blacks, whom they view as competing for their jobs or living off of government social programs funded by whites' hard-earned tax dollars. When those white workers get to the voting booth, their anger translates into an unwillingness to vote for black candidates.

Obama confronted this paradox in his speech in Philadelphia on Tuesday. "Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze -- a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many," Obama observed. "And yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns - this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding."

There is no doubt that some working-class whites harbor such resentments against blacks, just as it true that whites and blacks hold similar sentiments about Latino immigrants, and that many Hispanics have negative stereotypes about blacks. Among low-income and working-class Americans of all colors, such cross-cutting prejudices are well documented. It isn't surprising that these attitudes are reflected in voting behavior.

But let's be clear about the class nature of racial prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, and disparities. Wealthy whites are more likely than working-class whites to use the race card in the voting booth. Voting statistics reveal that most upper-income whites consistently vote in Republican, not Democratic, primaries, which means they don't have to vote for black or Latino candidates. And in partisan run-off elections, wealthy whites overwhelmingly vote for Republican over Democratic contenders. In the 2004 presidential contest, eight of the 10 wealthiest congressional districts voted for Bush. The two districts that went to Kerry were both in California's high-tech-oriented Silicon Valley. White voters earning incomes of more than \$200,000 a year cast 66 percent of their ballots for Bush. (The Kerry voters among them tended to be professionals in human services, government, teaching, and creative sectors, not those in business and management.)

In contrast, among white voters with family incomes between \$15,000 and \$30,000, 51 percent voted for Bush, and among white voters in the \$30,000 to \$50,000 range, 58 percent went with Bush.

If Barack Obama winds up facing John McCain in November, Obama will certainly attract some upper-class white voters -- including some among the 1 percent of Americans with incomes over \$364,657, who have 22 percent of all income and own 37 percent of all corporate stock. Because their numbers are so small, they won't make a big difference in the outcome of the election, except in terms of where they send their campaign contributions.

It is all but certain, though, that in an Obama-McCain face-off fewer wealthy whites will vote for Obama than working-class whites whom affluent pundits are so quick to label as racist. Indeed, we've already seen a significant number of blue-collar white voters show their support for Obama in Iowa, South Carolina, Wisconsin, and other states. Yes, white working-class Democrats in economically troubled Ohio favored Clinton over Obama. But in November, most of the blue-collar Democrats, working-class independents, and union members who voted for Clinton -- in Ohio and elsewhere -- are likely to switch to Obama, not McCain.

It is understandable that most wealthy whites would consistently vote for Republicans, who like low taxes and hate strong unions. But in recent decades, a significant number of working-class whites -- the so-called "Reagan Democrats" -- have voted for GOP candidates who have done so little to address their bread-and-butter concerns. As Thomas Frank argued in his book, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, the Republicans have successfully used "wedge" issues -- abortion, religion, gun control, gay rights, affirmative action, and, of course, the war on terrorism -- to persuade some working-class whites to vote against their economic interests.

But the tide seems to be changing. Certainly exasperation with the war in Iraq has played a role in bringing many working-class white voters back into the Democratic fold. But the major issues in this election -- stagnant wages, job insecurity, rising health-care and college costs, home foreclosures -- favor the Democrats. Some voters may be blinded by racial prejudice, but in November, pink slips and green dollars are likely to play a more important role than black or white skin.

Of course, class and income aren't the only factors that determine white voting behavior. Age plays a role, too. So far, Obama has inspired a significant increase in turnout among young white voters, but he hasn't fared as well among middle-aged and elderly whites. Unfortunately for the Democrats, young voters are fleeing the older Rust Belt areas like Ohio and Pennsylvania, both key battleground states.

In the Democratic primaries, white Catholics have favored Clinton, while white Protestants preferred Obama. Neither Democrat is likely to win over many white evangelicals, but a significant number might stay home in November if McCain can't convince them that he's sufficiently conservative. National Rifle Association members aren't likely to give Obama or Clinton many of their votes, either.

Unions play a critical role in shaping white workers' views and mobilizing them in elections. When voters' loyalties are divided between their economic interests and other concerns, union membership can be a crucial determinant. In 2004, for example, George Bush won by a 62 percent to 37 percent margin among white males. But John Kerry carried white males who were union members by a 59 percent to 38 percent difference. Bush won among white women by 55 percent to 44 percent, but Kerry won white women union members by 67 percent to 32 percent.

Similarly, gun owners favored Bush by a 63 percent to 36 percent margin, but union members who own guns supported Kerry 55 percent to 43 percent, according to an AFL-CIO survey. Bush carried all weekly church-goers by a 61 percent to 39 percent margin, but Kerry won among union members who attend church weekly by a 55 percent to 43 percent split.

Despite Kerry's tepid campaign and upper-crust demeanor, union members gave him 61 percent of their votes over Bush. In the battleground states, where unions focused their turnout efforts, they did even better. In Ohio, for example, union members favored Kerry by a 67 percent to 31 percent margin.

So, even if McCain captures the same proportion of white middle-aged and elderly votes as Bush did in 2004, Obama can still win if he can garner reasonable support among Hispanic voters and increase turn-out among African Americans and young white voters, which he has already shown he can do, while capturing a significant portion of union voters.

By focusing on voting behavior and attitudes, however, political pundits deflect focus away from other fundamental concerns. America's corporate and political rulers have long used racism, ethnic stereotypes, and immigrant bashing to divide working people and weaken their collective power. Manufacturers recruited Southern blacks to act as strikebreakers in Northern cities, and employers warned "No Irish need apply" and resorted to anti-Semitism to pit workers against each other. In hard economic times, scapegoating against blacks and Hispanic immigrants diverts white workers' attention away from the failure of business and political elites to create enough decent jobs.

Although working-class white Americans may harbor racist sentiments, they do not control the major institutions that are responsible for America's racial divide, including the economic forces that sometimes pit white, black, and Hispanic working families against each other for jobs, housing, and decent schools.

For example, it is upper-class whites who own and control the banks that persistently engage in abusive and predatory practices against black and Latino borrowers. Since the federal government began collecting data on mortgage loans in the 1970s, the practice of mortgage discrimination -- called "redlining" -- has been well documented. Even affluent blacks are denied loans at a higher rate than working-class whites. Similarly, real estate brokers are more likely to show white home-seekers more homes, in more locations, and in white neighborhoods than they are black homebuyers with similar incomes and educational backgrounds. These practices contribute to racial segregation in housing (which is still pervasive in every part of the country) and the lower rate of homeownership among African Americans, even among those with similar incomes to whites. That such practices are illegal hasn't stopped the nation's banking and real estate industry from engaging in them -- an industry owned and managed by wealthy white businesspersons, mostly men.

It is wealthy whites who also own and control the nation's largest corporations, few of whom have any African Americans or Latinos on their boards of directors (certainly not in numbers reflective of the larger population). It is these major white-controlled corporations that continue to discriminate against blacks, Latinos, and, yes, women, in hiring and promotion. A few years ago, for example, a federal court found that black employees at Coca-Cola made an average of \$26,000 a year less than white employees, were routinely passed over for promotions, and frequently earned less than the white subordinates whom they trained or supervised. Three years ago, Sodexo, the giant food-services company, agreed to pay \$80 million to settle a lawsuit after documents revealed that it had systematically denied promotions to 3,400 black midlevel managers; although blacks comprised 12 percent of the company's managers, they accounted for only 2 percent of its upper-management positions.

Such practices are hardly confined to a handful of corporations. Sociologists have documented, for example, that employers are more likely to grant white applicants job interviews and make them offers than they are black applicants with the same skills and level of experience. White workers are more likely to be promoted than black employees with comparable experience. Even when in management positions, blacks are often ghettoized in certain niches, such as "community relations" or in divisions that focus on black customers.

It is the major media, owned and controlled by wealthy whites and managed primarily by upper-middle class white publishers and editors, who perpetuate racial stereotypes in their news reporting. As political scientist Martin Gilens documented in his book, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, the media systematically portray blacks in stereotypical ways.

In photos and prose, the media over-represent blacks in stories about the poor and welfare. Gilens found, for example, that more than 60 percent of poor people portrayed in the media were black, when in reality blacks comprise only 27 percent of all poor people. Similar slanted images portray blacks as more likely to be on welfare and be jobless than they are in reality, reinforcing negative stereotypes.

It is upper-class and upper-middle-class whites who live in and control the wealthy suburbs that keep blacks out of their communities and their local schools. For example, they utilize exclusionary zoning, which limits the construction of apartment buildings and favors large homes on huge lots. Some might argue that this is really class, not racial, prejudice, that wealthy white suburbanites fear that allowing poor people to live nearby might lower property values. In fact, studies document that, with some exceptions, middle-class African Americans -- even those who can afford to buy expensive homes -- are systematically excluded from wealthy suburbs. Banks and real estate agents contribute to this exclusion by "steering" affluent black buyers away from such areas. But the behavior of upper-class whites who sit on local zoning boards and who move to exclusive suburbs to avoid living near blacks also plays an important role.

It is also wealthy whites who long resisted allowing blacks, even affluent blacks, to join their exclusive private country clubs, so that they could keep their distance while playing tennis and golf. Last year, for example, two candidates running for mayor of Dallas, Darrell Jordan and Tom Leppert, were criticized for being members of the Dallas Country Club, which had no black members. Although such barriers have started to fall, especially in recent years after bad publicity focusing on country clubs on the Professional Golf Association tour that practice discrimination, many private clubs still cater to corporate executives and exclude or limit black and female members.

It is possible, even likely, that many upper-class whites are not personally prejudiced in the vulgar way that we associate with hard-core racism. They would never join a white supremacist group, never tell an overtly racist joke in public, and might even like watching *Oprah* on TV. A handful of them might even donate money to causes that help African Americans like the NAACP or the United Negro College Fund. But in their decision-making roles within the most powerful institutions in society, they -- more than blue-collar whites -- support practices that contribute to the nation's racial divide.

For sure, America has made significant progress in addressing both racial prejudice and racial discrimination. Thanks to the civil-rights revolution, we've witnessed the significant growth of the African American middle class and the dramatic decline of the overt daily terror imposed on black Americans, especially in the South. The number of black elected officials at all levels of government has seen a significant increase, and many of those officials have garnered cross-racial support.

There is, of course, still a white-enforced "glass ceiling" that keeps many qualified African Americans from reaching the top echelons of society. But unlike 30 years ago, blacks are now found on corporate boards and in top management, as TV newscasters and daily newspaper editors, and as presidents and administrators of major colleges, foundations, and hospitals.

Despite this progress, in every sphere of American life -- income, hiring, promotion, housing, the quality of public schools, college attendance, treatment by the criminal justice system, media portrayals, and others -- race remains a divisive issue. While upper-middle class pundits may get some smug pleasure out of pointing to racial prejudice among America's white working-class voters, they would be more accurate if they looked up, rather than down, the economic ladder to identify who really has the power to prop up, or fix, the institutions that turn bigotry into discrimination.



Peter Dreier is professor of politics and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy program at Occidental College in Los Angeles, and coauthor of *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City*.