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GROUND LEVEL COVERAGE OF CAMPAIGN '08

White Voters Deserve More Credit

The Clintons are playing the race card, and it isn't pretty.

In the four primaries and caucuses held so far, Barack Obama received between 34% and 38% of white votes in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada and 24% in the three-way race in South Carolina. If you believe the Clinton campaign operatives, and some of the media pundits who've regurgitated their spin, the 36% of white voters in South Carolina who voted for Hillary, and the 40% who voted for Edwards -- as well as their white counterparts in the three other contests -- voted against Obama primarily because he's black.

So, they suggest, he'll have a hard time winning many future primaries where white voters comprise a majority of votes. And, they imply, if Obama happens to win the Democratic nomination, he'll have difficulty winning the White House, because white Republicans and independents are even less likely than white Democrats to vote for a black candidate.

That was the clear message of Bill Clinton's statement after Obama stunned his wife by beating her in the South Carolina primary 55.4% to 26.5%, with 17.6% for Edwards. Asked a question that had nothing to do with race, the former president and would-be First Husband told reporters in Columbia, SC: "Jesse Jackson won South Carolina in '84 and '88. Jackson ran a good campaign. And Obama ran a good campaign here."

Bill was trying to do two things with this statement: linking Obama to Jackson in voters' minds and suggesting that Obama can't attract enough white voters to get elected President, so Hillary is the "electable" Democrat. His was seeking to pigeonhole Obama as the "black" candidate -- not only as a matter of pigmentation but also as a matter of voter appeal.

Clinton's campaign operatives were more blatant than the ex-President, shooting out emails comparing Obama and Jackson, noting that in 1988, Jackson won the South Carolina primary with 54% of the vote (to 19% for Al Gore and only 18% for Michael Dukakis, the eventual Democratic nominee).

The Clinton campaign message was transparent: although Obama can win enough black votes to win a few primaries, but he can't prevail in states where whites comprise a huge majority of voters, and certainly isn't as "electable" as Hillary in the November election.

But there's no evidence that the white Democrats who voted for Clinton and Edwards are racists who wouldn't vote for a black candidate. Exit polls don't tell us why they preferred Clinton or Edwards over Obama. Clinton voters might have preferred Obama over Edwards as their second choice. Edwards voters may have supported Obama over Clinton in a two-way race.

And even if Obama was their third pick, and even if race factored into their primary vote decision, that doesn't mean that, come November, they'd prefer any of the Republicans over Obama. If their vote in November is based on ideology, issues, or even personality, most Democrats would cast a ballot for Obama over McCain, Huckabee, Romney, or Giuliani. So, too, might most independents, a majority of whom lean Democratic in partisan terms and more liberal than conservative on issues.

The Clinton campaign's comparison of Obama to Jackson is both racist and misguided, for several reasons. For one thing, Americans have changed in the past 20 years. Yes, racism is still alive and well, and there are still many examples of white politicians successfully playing the "race card" to ignite racial prejudice. The most blatant recent example was Republican Bob Corker's television ad during his 2006 campaign against Democrat Harold Ford, an African American, for the U.S. Senate seat from Tennessee. In the ad, a young blond white actress talked about meeting Ford, a 36-year-old bachelor, "at the Playboy party." At the end of the ad, she winks and says to the camera, "Harold -- call me." The ad was clearly meant to appeal to racial stereotypes and helped Corker win by a 51% to 48% margin, with Ford winning 40% of the white vote.

Despite Ford's slim loss in Tennessee, in the past two decades, America has seen more African Americans rise to visible positions of influence in politics and government, business, the media, religion, the military, and other institutions. Across the country, even in the South, white voters have become more comfortable voting for black candidates. An increasing number of blacks have been elected with white votes in contests for city council, school board, mayor, state legislature, Governor, and Congress. Prejudice hasn't disappeared, but in terms of racial politics, Americans have grown up. By comparing Obama to Jackson, the Clintons are trying to take us backwards.

Moreover, many voters who are casting ballots this year weren't even born, or were pre-teens, when Jackson ran in 1988. Voters under 29, even those under 35, are less likely than their to look at politics through a racial prism. They now comprise a significant and growing slice of the American electorate. In this primary season, Obama has been most successful at getting them to the polls and attracting their votes. Obama captured 52% of South Carolina's white voters age 18-29, compared with 15% of whites over 60, most of whom grew up in the Jim Crow South.

Equally important, Obama is not Jackson. Jackson came out of the civil rights movement and was identified as a figure tied explicitly to racial issues and racial conflict. He was also more radical in his political views -- at least the ones he publicly espoused -- than Obama. Jackson sought to build a "rainbow coalition," and definitely attracted the support of some white voters, especially in the 1988 Michigan primary, but most of his white support was among the left wing of Democrat voters. Jackson was hardly what political scientists call a racial "cross-over" candidate.

Obama's appeal is much broader both ideologically and racially. On key issues, Jackson positioned himself considerably to the left of the other Democratic candidates -- views that the media framed as outside the mainstream, just as they've done this year with Edwards' attacks on big business and the very rich. Obama's policy prescriptions, while certainly liberal, are very similar to Hillary Clinton's, with the exception of his outspoken opposition to the war in Iraq. This Democratic primary season, it is John Edwards who is the most forthright progressive.

As a civil rights activist and political candidate, Jackson's soaring rhetoric reflected his background as a minister and preacher. Obama has shown his ability to speak in the cadences of a black preacher, but as a former community organizer and law professor, he has developed a rhetorical style that easily crosses racial and class boundaries.

Jackson was a close aide to Rev. Martin Luther King. Obama is a generation removed from the civil rights struggle, but when he invokes King's memory and legacy, as he often does in the campaign -- frequently using King's phrase, "the urgency of now" -- it meant to simultaneously signal his gratitude for the civil rights pioneers as well as draw on King's moral appeal to white America's better instincts. Although in 1988, Jackson often urged Americans to "keep hope alive," it is Obama whose refrain, "the audacity of hope," has captured the nation's pent-up idealism in 2008. If anything, Obama is more likely than Clinton to appeal to independents and even some Republicans in November.

Sure, some Americans still vote along racial lines, just as they've often voted along ethnic and gender lines. But just as men are more likely to vote for female candidates now than they were 20 years ago, and just as Protestants are more willing to vote for Catholics than they did a generation or two ago, Americans have matured on racial matters.

Moreover, America's racial and ethnic mosaic has become more complex. In the Nevada caucuses, despite the Culinary Workers Union's last-minute endorsement for Obama, the vast majority of its Latino members supported Clinton, while most black members voted for Obama. But if Hillary winds up as the Democratic candidate, those black union members will certainly vote for her over any Republican by an overwhelming margin. And almost all of the Latino waitresses and hotel workers who cast caucus votes for Clinton will vote for Obama in November.

Likewise, almost all of the 78% of black Democrats who voted for Obama (compared with 19% for Clinton and 2% for Edwards) in South Carolina on Saturday will no doubt cast the ballots for whomever the Democratic candidate is in November. The bigger question is whether the Democrats next November will invest the resources needed for an effective get-out-the-vote effort among blacks and young people who have come out in record numbers so far, in large measure to support Obama.

The Clinton campaign's sleight-of-hand trick to link Obama with Jackson is a desperate attempt to convince pundits and voters alike that Obama's South Carolina landslide was a fluke, and that his appeal to white voters is too slim to make him a viable candidate in most super-Tuesday states on February 5 and in the November contest. This ploy is as racist as George H. W. Bush's "Willie Horton" advertisement to stir white voters to oppose Michael Dukakis in 1988. Such appeals to racism worked 20 years ago. Hopefully these tactics won't work this year. And if Clinton wins the nomination by playing the race card, shame on her and on her husband.

*Peter Dreier is the E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics, and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy program, at Occidental College. He is coauthor of *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City*, *Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the 21st Century*, and *Regions That Work: How Cities and Suburbs Can Grow Together*.*