

# Children aware of white male monopoly on White House

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Challenging the idea that children live in a color or gender blind world, a new study from The University of Texas at Austin reveals most elementary-school-age children are aware there has been no female, African-American, or Hispanic President of the United States. And, many of the children attribute the lack of representation to discrimination.

Rebecca Bigler, professor of psychology, and a team of researchers at the university and the University of Kansas have published their findings in the October issue of the journal *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*.

During 2006, more than a year before Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama entered the presidential race, the researchers interviewed 205 children between the ages of five and 10 about their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about the similarities among U.S. presidents. In three studies, children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds answered questions about the absence of female, African-American and Hispanic presidents.

The researchers found most children are aware that women and minorities have been excluded from the U.S. presidency. Although most of the children believed people of all races and genders should be president, they offered surprising answers as to why only white males have held the nation's highest political office:

-- One in four participants said it is illegal for women and minorities to

hold the office of president;

- One in three children attributed the lack of female, African-American and Latino presidents to racial and gender bias on the part of voters; and
- While some children expressed the belief that prejudice shapes how adults vote, another third of the participants said members of the excluded groups lacked the skills to hold the position.

"The U.S. presidency is a high profile case of racial and gender exclusion," Bigler, director of the Gender and Racial Attitudes Lab at the university, said. "And because this topic is not typically explained to children, they appear to create their own explanations for the exclusion."

Children generally were optimistic about the possibility that they could become president, the researchers found. However, girls who attributed the lack of female presidents to discrimination were more likely to report they could not become president. In contrast, African-American children who identified discrimination as the reason for the lack of diversity showed an increased interest in becoming president.

"Perhaps the increased interest in becoming president is a result of the long and well-known history of African-Americans' struggle to achieve equality in the United States," said Bigler. "Young girls are not as aware of the women's rights movements and are less likely to be knowledgeable about women's struggles to achieve political power."

Bigler notes the 2008 presidential election has the potential to significantly alter children's view.

"If Obama loses his bid for the presidency, there may be little change in children's attitudes, but it could fuel their perception that American voters are racially prejudiced," Bigler said. "In contrast, if Obama wins children may believe that exclusionary laws and racial prejudice no longer shape the outcomes of the presidential elections."

Source: University of Texas at Austin

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