

Few white voters upset about Obama victory despite lingering racism

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Racism may be less of a factor in politics than other realms of life, according to a new University of Florida study, which found few white voters in Florida to be upset by the presidential candidacy of a black man, and many to be proud of it.

To assess attitudes among white voters in a southern state about Barack Obama's historic election to the presidency, two UF political scientists analyzed results from four statewide telephone surveys -- each involving between 449 and 829 respondents - conducted in the fall of 2008 and spring of 2009. Their study was published in the August issue of the electronic journal *The Forum*.

"We didn't see a lot of evidence that race was paramount in the way people thought about Obama," said Michael Martinez, a UF political science professor who did the study with UF [political scientist](#) Stephen Craig. "In fact, quite a number of white Floridians - both those who are Republicans and those who are Democrats - took pride in a black man being able to secure the nomination and win the election."

They estimated that two-thirds of white non-Hispanic Floridians surveyed - 65 percent - were "proud or inspired" by a black candidate's ability to win his party's nomination for president. While that sentiment was nearly universal among those who preferred Obama - 89 percent - it was also shared by a substantial number of McCain supporters, 47 percent.

"I was surprised by the magnitude of the pride factor and that it extended into the McCain camp at a time when there were plenty of hard feelings on both sides," Craig said.

Despite these [positive feelings](#), the study found that racism persists. An estimated one-third of the respondents - 34 percent - were upset by "blacks pushing themselves where they are not wanted," a statement used in the survey to assess racist sentiment.

"There are still racists out there, but they appear not to be applying those attitudes to a political campaign in which one candidate happens to be an African-American," Craig said. "It could be that for many of these people race is more important when it comes to who their daughter is dating or which family is moving next door to them than it is in a political context."

Part of the reason that race did not emerge as a major issue in the election may stem from Obama's biracial background and his efforts not to call attention to his blackness, Martinez said.

"During the campaign Obama went out of his way to try to overcome any anticipated problems with racially conservative white voters by noting that his mother was white and he was raised a good portion of his life by white grandparents," Martinez said. "It was no accident that he emphasized Midwestern values as a way to connect with white America."

Perhaps more important than Obama's image is the growing partisan nature of American politics and tendency for [voters](#) to see the last presidential election as a referendum on the Bush administration, illustrated by the Obama campaign's twin mantras of "change" and "no third term," he said.

"Many people judge political candidates by the state of the economy," Martinez said. "In 2008 this country's economic situation was not doing well prior to September and it was doing terribly afterwards, which really handicapped McCain going into the November election."

Measuring prejudice can be tricky because people are often reluctant to reveal socially undesirable responses, Craig said. The researchers got around this by using a technique designed to ask about racial attitudes indirectly, he said.

In each survey, participants were divided into different groups. In the first survey, for example, one group was asked to state how many of four statements, such as "the way gasoline prices keep going up" upset them - but without revealing which ones. Another group responded to the same statements as well as one additional one: "a black candidate running for president."

Any difference in the average number of upset-generating statements given by the two groups was then attributed to the additional item about a black candidate, Craig said.

In two of the other surveys, respondents were asked to respond to the same four statements. In one, the additional statement was whether they were upset by "a black man being elected president," and in the other if they were upset by "blacks pushing themselves where they are not wanted."

One survey also asked respondents whether a different set of four statements, such as "American athletes participating in the Olympics" made them proud or inspired. The additional statement some respondents received was "the fact that a black candidate is able to win his party's nomination for president."

More information: The study is accessible online at
www.bepress.com/forum/vol8/iss2/art4/

Provided by University of Florida

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