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Obama victory could rewrite painful U.S. race saga

Tom Roberts | Sep. 23, 2008

News Analysis

Somewhere beneath the turmoil about presidential campaign lipstick remarks and the latest stage of market meltdown, the unspeakable ?r? word (race) continues to buzz quietly.

It can be detected, for example, in new laws requiring photo IDs in order to vote; it?s heard among the purging of voter roles on the basis of a single returned letter or an address on a new property foreclosure list.

Those who have long tracked racial issues charge that the sometimes systematic culling of ineligible voters targets mostly poor urban voters, who also happen to be mostly black.

Only a scant few might suggest that racism ended when laws forced the ?whites only? signs to come down in places like Alabama and Mississippi, just as hardly a soul would say that racism in the political world ended with the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

So the question begs to be asked: Is there any way to predict how much a painful legacy of racisim will affect the tight presidential race between Sens. Barack Obama and John McCain?

In a "60 Minutes" segment Sept. 21, interviewer Steve Kroft, during a conversation with Obama, in Elko, Nev., was pretty frank, saying: ?I know, for a fact, that there are a lot of people out there, there are a lot of people right here in Elko, who won't vote for you because you're black. I mean, there's not much you can do. But how do you deal with it??

The presumption needed no verification, no backup data, it?s indisputable.

The reality, however, has gone subtle, far more subtle than poll taxes and threats of violence against blacks who show up to vote.

For decades, the movement in voting has been ?toward making the franchise universal,? writes Andrew Hacker, in the September 25 issue of *The New York Review of Books*. ?Property qualifications were ended; the poll tax was nullified; the voting age was lowered to 18. But now strong forces are at work to downsize the electorate, ostensibly to combat fraud and strip the rolls? of ineligible voters.

In reality, he said, the new intitiatives ?make it harder for many African Americans to vote, largely because they

are more vulnerable to challenges than other parts of the population.?

The issue becomes partisan, of course, because blacks are overwhelmingly Democrats.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 24 states have broader voter identification requirements than mandated by the 2002 Help America Vote Act.

?In these states, all voters are asked to show identification prior to voting,? according to the conference web site. ?Seven of these states specify that voters must show a photo ID; the other 17 states accept additional forms of identification that do not necessarily include a photo.?

However, every state has ?some sort of recourse for voters without identification to cast a vote.? In Georgia and Indiana, voters without ID vote a provisional ballot, and must return to election officials within a few days and show a photo ID in order for their ballots to be counted.

Hacker contends that the law in Indiana, upheld by a Supreme Court decision, ?will not only make it harder to add new people to the rolls; many who had previously voted without photo identification are now required to produce an official photograph.?

The requirement places an undue burden on poor and minority populations who, several studies have shown, are least likely of all voting groups to have licenses or the means to get to state offices where alternative identification can be procured.

In a number of areas, the NAACP is investigating and looking into potential problems. One of them is in Michigan where there is an ongoing dispute over whether the Republican Party had planned to use foreclosure lists in urban areas to check on voter validity.

Under the scheme, someone who presented an address that has been foreclosed would be disqualified. Since a county-level official was first quoted as saying the party intended to use the lists, state-level Republican officials have denied any intent to use such tactics.

Some have pointed out that using foreclosure rolls might be inaccurate and illegal because residents of foreclosed properties can continue to live in their homes, under a variety of circumstances, for a period following the initial notice.

Hacker, in his essay, ?Obama: The Price of Being Black,? also takes issue with a requirement of the Help America Vote Act that requires each state to maintain an electronic statewide voter registration list linked to every precinct. ?States were also mandated to keep their lists current, eliminating the people who die or move away.?

One method used to cull the lists, called ?voter caging,? involved sending letters to all names on the voters rolls and then eliminating those returned if the addressee could not be found.

?When Ohio purged 35,427 returned names in 2004, a review found that the addresses were in ?mostly urban and minority areas.? Here, too, getting back on the rolls can be like mending a mistaken credit rating.?

One argument also contends that such rules inordinately disenfranchise blacks because they tend to move more often than other racial/ethnic groups.

Another method employed in Florida is to use computers to match Social Security numbers with names, a practice that Hacker contends is riddled with error, even when done by the Social Security Administration itself. And since the computer program used requires only an 80 percent match of letters in a name with those who have a criminal record (disqualifying them from voting), and since a majority of the incarcerated are black, the mistaken disenfranchisement of blacks could be significant.

He notes that a dissenting judge in a decision allowing the Florida method pointed out that ?while black voters made up 13 percent of the scanned pool, they comprised 26 percent of those who were purged; while whites were 66 percent of the pool, they were only 17 percent of the rejected group.?

In his answer to Kroft, Obama made the expected nod to the apparent: ?Are there gonna? be some people who don't vote for me because I'm black? Of course. There are probably some African-Americans who are voting for me because I'm black. Or maybe others who are just inspired by the idea of breaking new ground. And so I think all that's a wash.?

Obama then added that after all he?s been through -- the tough battles against a formidable field -- he?s still standing little more than a month before the election. And that, he said, ?tells me that the American people are good. That they are judging me on my ideas and my vision my values, and not my skin color.?

His view, of course, is the most optimistic view one can put on the matter, and a view that seems to depart from history. And from current polls.

A recent poll by AP-Yahoo News, designed in partnership with Stanford University, showed that Obama?s support would tick up six percentage points if there were no racial prejudice among voters. According to a report on CNN.com, ?The results suggest that 40 percent of white Americans hold at least a partly negative view toward blacks, including more than a third of white Democrats and independents. A small percentage of voters -- 2.5 percent of those surveyed -- said they may turn away from Obama because of his race.?

Should he win, Obama just might provide a counter argument to a point made by Mark Noll of the University of Notre Dame, who writes in the ?theological conclusion? to his recent history, *God and Race in American Politics*:

?Christian altruism, Christian philanthropy, Christian consolation, and Christian responsibility are not the only forces for good in American history, but they loom very large and have had very positive effects.

?And yet ? and yet ? The American political system and the American practice of Christianity, which have provided so much good for so many people for so many years, have never been able to overcome race.?

The survey, conducted August 29-31, questioned 1,031 people and has a sampling error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

Experts point out that it's hard to quantify racial prejudice because many people who hold prejudices are not going to admit to it. Watch how race could affect the election.

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