



Perspectives

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on Women & Politics

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DO WE VOTE FOR PEOPLE WHO LOOK LIKE US?

The Face of the American President

Two weeks ago, *Perspectives* focused on the gender gap, including the impact that women's votes had in the 2006 U. S. Senatorial elections. This week, we have to wonder: Are men co-opting the gender gap? Put another way, do we vote for people who look like us?

The gender gap in voting refers to the difference between the percentage of women and the percentage of men voting for a given candidate. As pundits extrapolate from various poll results, it is beginning to appear clear that a percentage of white men may make the difference in this year's presidential contest. Pollsters define "working-class white men" as those without a college degree, including union members and workers in service and technical jobs, typically making less than \$50,000 a year. Working-class white men, who make up about 25% of the vote in a presidential election, may not vote as a block, but the polls suggest that their viewpoints are eerily similar at this point in the campaign.

The majority of working-class white men seem to agree:

- Senator Clinton represents everything that is not good about the American woman. She has an advanced degree; she works rather than being a stay-at-home wife and mom; she represents the future for their daughters, and they don't like it.
- Senator Obama is perceived as an individual who is lacking in experience and who would probably favor blacks and other minorities, a potential threat to the working-class white man. But working-class white men find him tough, smart, friendly and honest – or at least tougher, smarter, friendlier and more honest than Senator Clinton.

So is the potential woman president better or worse than the potential black president to the working-class white men of the United States? Who knows? Tuesday's Wall Street Journal quoted an Ohio steelworker as saying that while he favors Clinton, he perceives that most of his working-class white men co-workers do not. His comment was telling: "People don't want to speak out against Obama because of the fear of being seen as racist....It's easier to say you want to keep a woman barefoot and pregnant....You can call a woman anything."

And it's not just a race between the woman and the African-American. It looks like by fall there will be a "minority" against the "status-quo" – a status quo which is looking a lot like Senator McCain at the moment. And the sentiment with working-class white men then becomes one of cross-over. Polls show that working-class white men really don't like either of the "minority" choices and are looking favorably toward Senator McCain. Democratic working-class white men are reporting to pollsters that the Democratic party doesn't have any remaining "viable candidates" – thus that the nominee, whether Clinton or Obama – will not claim their loyalty, and that they will be crossing over to McCain in the fall or not voting at all.

There are more working-class white men than there are African-American and Hispanic voters combined. And the fact is that they are having an identity crisis. Senators Clinton and Obama are not like them, while Senator McCain is in so many ways. He served in the military, as did many of them. McCain is perceived as tough-talking and no-nonsense, two characteristics that the working-class white man believes are two of his characteristics, also.

Can the working-class white men co-opt the women's view on the gender gap and make the difference in this year's presidential election? Is the nation ready for anything other than a white male as president? Race bashing and gender bashing still occur, that's for sure. And we like people who look like us, that's for sure, too. But are we unable to get past how people look, and instead, concentrate on what they think?

News reports suggest that Democratic super-delegates are pondering commitments they have made versus the apparent preference of their state's voters. The uproar over super-delegates has raised questions in my mind, and they are questions for my African-American women friends: Does gender trump race? Does race trump gender? Who looks more like you, an African-American woman: Senator Clinton or Senator Obama?

Will the working-class white man shape the face – the gender and color – of our next president? Do a majority of Americans remain unsure that women can manage positions of leadership? Do a majority of Americans remain unwilling to consider a leader who is of a different race?

This year, it seems that the potential face of our president may be more important to many of us than positions on the issues. We can't discount the fact that this is going to be an amazing political year – it's a year of firsts already. Should we, as women – and the majority of the voting public – close ranks and vote for those who look like us? Two weeks ago, I wrote that while each of us can make a difference individually, as a gender, should women ever decide to assert ourselves as a group, we can make not only a difference, but an impact! If women voted for people who look like us this year, we would have a woman president in 2009. But women will not. We will not vote for a woman simply because she is a woman.

Women will not vote for a woman simply because she is a woman. Working-class white men are telling pollsters that they may very well vote for Senator McCain simply because he is a white man. Think about that when you go to the polls.

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