

Racial Views Impact Election

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One result is that Barack Obama's path to the presidency is steeper than it would be if he were white.

Until now, social scientists have not closely examined racial sentiments on a nationwide scale at a moment when race is central to choosing the next president. The poll, which featured a large sample of Americans — more than 2,200 — and sophisticated survey techniques rarely used in media surveys, reflected the complexity, change and occasional contradictions of race relations.

More whites apply positive attributes to blacks than negative ones, and blacks are even more generous in their descriptions of whites. Racial prejudice is lower among college-educated whites living outside the South. And many whites who think most blacks are somewhat lazy, violent or boastful are willing or even eager to vote for Obama over Republican John McCain, who is white.



John McCain

The poll, however, shows that blacks and whites see racial discrimination in starkly different terms. When asked "how much discrimination against blacks" exists, 10 percent of whites said "a lot" and 45 percent said "some."

Among blacks, 57 percent said "a lot" and all but a fraction of the rest said "some." Asked how much of America's existing racial tension is created by blacks, more than one-third of white respondents said "most" or "all," and 9 percent said "not much." Only 3 percent of blacks said "most" or "all," while half said "not much at all."

Nearly three-fourths of blacks said white people have too much influence in American politics. Only 12 percent of whites agreed. Almost three times as many blacks as whites said blacks have too little influence.

Far more blacks than whites say government officials "usually pay less attention to a request or complaint from a black person than a white person."

One in five whites have felt admiration for blacks "very" or "extremely" often. Seventy percent of blacks have felt the same about whites.

The poll may surprise those who thought Obama's appeal to young voters proves Americans in their 20s and 30s are clearly less racially biased than their parents. The survey found no meaningful differences among age groups in whites' perceptions of blacks, although older whites appear more likely to discuss their views.

Some findings fall into the glass half-empty or half-full category. One-fourth of white Democrats ascribed at least two negative attributes to blacks. But two-thirds of those Democrats said they will vote for Obama.

Polls consistently show Obama running about even with McCain, or leading by a notably smaller margin than the one Democrats enjoy over Republicans in most generic surveys about which party is best suited to govern.

The AP-Yahoo News poll suggests that racial prejudice could cost Obama up to 6 percentage points this fall. That's a big hurdle in a nation whose last two presidential elections were decided by much smaller margins.

Stanford University political scientist Paul Sniderman said that in today's society, racial prejudice "is a deep challenge, and it's one that Americans in general, and for that matter, political scientists, just haven't been ready to acknowledge fully."

For minority candidates such as Obama, he said, "there's a penalty for prejudice, and it's not trivial." If the presidential contest remains close, he said, racial prejudice "might be enough to tip the election."

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