

Obama escapes Bradley effect, but race still a factor

He makes inroads with whites, but favourable circumstances should have given him bigger lead, experts say

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After a campaign where the colour of Barack Obama's skin was a relentless point of debate, the Democratic contender did very well with many white voters, laying to rest the fear that a historic night would be tainted by racial prejudice.

There had been much talk in the last days of the so-called Bradley effect, named after Tom Bradley, the black candidate in the 1982 California governor's race, whose lead in the polls vanished on election day.

Instead, Mr. Obama's performance confirmed the polls, with anxieties about the economy and the direction of the country prevailing over reluctance about electing the United States's first biracial president.

"It's taken two wars and almost a depression to get people to overlook the skin colour and go for the qualified candidate," said Charles Henry, the political scientist at the University of California at Berkeley who first documented the Bradley effect."

Obviously it's a major milestone but I'm not ready to put to bed the notion that race is dead in American politics."

Mr. Obama and John McCain split white votes across the United States except in the South - where Mr. McCain got twice as many votes, The Associated Press reported.

Nevertheless, Mr. Obama made inroads in key battlegrounds, winning over the white working-class voters of Ohio and Pennsylvania, gaining new support among southern whites.

In North Carolina, for example, exit polls showed he had the support of 37 per cent of white voters, a 10-point gain on the score by John Kerry, the Democratic contender in 2004.

Harvard University political scientist Dan Hopkins said such an increase is significant even if it is still a minority of white North Carolinians.

Since Lyndon Johnson's 1964 election, "traditionally the Democrats have almost never won the majority of southern whites," Dr. Hopkins noted.

But Dr. Hopkins said the Bradley effect has not had an impact since the mid-1990s because hot-button issues such as crime have faded.

Instead, he said, poll respondents could rationalize their rejection of Mr. Obama by citing his inexperience or his purported liberalism.

As a result, some think Mr. Obama's lead should have been larger considering all the circumstances favouring him - his massive campaign spending and his rival's erratic performance, weariness from eight years of Bush presidency and, mostly, the economic meltdown.

Forecasting models show that a slumping economy and an unpopular incumbent president normally translate into an eight-point victory for the candidate from the other party, said Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford University political scientist.

"Obama does not seem to be winning by that margin. ... There may be a slight penalty for race. If it was a white candidate, it would probably be a wider gap," Dr. Iyengar said.

Dr. Hopkins predicted that Mr. Obama's ethnicity will be less of an issue in the next election.

Many black American politicians have run for office at the mayoral levels, he noted. "The initial election was racialized but afterward white voters judged them by their records."

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