

Race, Sex, Ancestry, or Religion: How Should We Vote?

Rodrigo Praino (January 30, 2008)



An African-American, a Woman, a Mormon and an Italian-American...

How many Americans are willing to vote - or not vote - for a candidate because of his/her race, sex, ancestry, or religion? These are becoming the four key questions in this primary season. Front-runners include an African-American, a Woman, a Mormon and an Italian-American (who happens to be a Catholic). And one could also argue that being a war veteran, John McCain too could trigger an emotional identification chord - especially among soldiers, veterans and their families.

But do people actually vote this way? The answer is not an easy one, and perhaps there is not one answer to the question.

For most people politics is local, family-based, and machine-governed. Political machines large or small control the votes of entire families, groups and communities all over the country. They may



well use ethnicity, religion, and gender among their election slogans, but what they specialize in is connections and patronage – and many people are quite happy to trade their vote for all sorts of personal favors. This is an iron rule of politics (albeit not the only one) especially when politics is – as it often the case – eminently a local activity.

But today's Presidential politics leaves little room for local, territory-based machine politics. The political appeal is too universalistic and the campaign, strongly influenced by old and new media, develops at a national, not a local scale. No ties to the territory, to the specific people and needs of the place. This phenomenon is typical of politics in large cities, where many people live for professional reasons without any special attachment to their neighborhood and actually tend to vote based on principles, opinions, and ideas that are formed through the media rather than in community life. A similar attitude tends to be also typical of Presidential politics today, especially in the primaries. Voting for a candidate because of race, sex, ancestry, or religion would fall into this kind of attitude. How will it work?

Many observers say it will not work. They argue that Obama is not a real African-American, that Clinton is not a real woman, that Giuliani is not a real Italian/American and that Romney is not a real Mormon. All their arguments are quite interesting.

Sen. Obama is the son of an African immigrant. He has no strong ties with all the African-American cultural legacy that can be traced back to the dark periods of slavery and segregation. And make no mistake: being an African-American is much more than having a dark skin color. Sen. Clinton is an ex-conservative, the wife of an ex-President, a career-oriented kind of person whom politically-conscious women may not be inclined to pick as their gender's representative. And make no mistake: being a political woman (as opposed to a political man) is much more than simply being of feminine sex. Then comes Mayor Giuliani: he is known for having gone after "his own kind" in his mafia prosecutions of the 1980s (?), and seems to be little interested in the Italian/American community, or at least less interested than other prominent Italian/Americans. And make no mistake: being an Italian/American is much more than simply carrying a surname that ends with a vowel. Finally, Gov. Romney is trying his best to make people forget about his religious faith. And make no mistake: people won't.

All these arguments are very interesting and can be sustained in conferences all over the world in different ways. However, we've all seen first-hand the kind of support the African-American community is giving to Sen. Obama, for example, which suggests that many academic analysis may not be so reliable after all.

In an election where "ideology" can actually find room by itself, the actual outcome may well be dictated by one or two single issues. Why should we preemptively assume that one of these issues may not be race, sex, ancestry or religion?

Clearly Sen. Obama is not only an African-American; he is also young and passionate. Sen. Clinton is not only a woman; she is also experienced and carries the legacy of a Presidency most Americans believe was good. Mayor Giuliani is not only an Italian/American; he is also the hero from 9/11 and an forceful mayor of an "unmanageable city". Gov. Romney is not only a Mormon; he is also a successful Governor and is considered "Mr. Perfect" from a Republican point of view. And all these aspects of these candidate's personal background that could influence voters equally, or more than



the “ethnic” aspects discussed above.

Yes, Presidential politics leaves room for this kind of speculations and no, there hardly is an “ethnic” or “minority” sentiment among the Americans so strong to influence – alone – the voting decision of large “blocks” of people.

But the question remains: how will “minorities” behave towards one or two candidates that belong to their own minority group. There are only two historical precedents that can help us for now: Al Smith in 1928, who pundits believe lost the election also because he was Irish/Italian/Catholic and John Kennedy in 1960, who experts agree that received and lost more or less the same amount of votes for being Irish/Catholic.

Is this “old stuff”? Sure, in 2004 John Kerry’s Catholic faith slipped by quietly, just as Rudy Giuliani’s italoamericanness and Roman Catholicism seems to be a great non-factor of these primary elections. But, after JFK, the “religion problem” was solved and almost forgotten – at least for Catholics. As for race, ethnicity, and gender let’s see what happens now... after all the male/Wasp model of presidential politics might have come to exhaustion.

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