

# POLITICO

## Racists for Obama?

By: [Ben Smith](#)

October 18, 2008 06:56 AM EST

New polling and a trickle of stories from the battleground states suggest that Sen. Barack Obama's coalition includes one unlikely group: white voters with negative views of African-Americans.

Race has become the elephant in the room of the 2008 presidential campaign, with Obama's prospect of becoming the first black president drawing some Americans closer to him while pushing others away. At times, the contest has slipped into a familiar dynamic of allegations of racism and outraged denial — but it's also challenged some easy assumptions about race, racism and prejudice.

“What you see is it's perfectly possible to hold a negative view of at least one aspect of African-Americans and yet simultaneously prefer Obama,” said Charles Franklin, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “Racial feelings are not as cut and dried — not as black and white — as people often say.”

Franklin explored those contradictions in a large, [national survey](#) taken in mid-September, when the Illinois Democratic senator's rival, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), led in many polls and the nation's economic woes had not yet produced a deep crisis. The poll asked voters whether they agreed with the statement that “African-Americans often use race as an excuse to justify wrongdoing.” About a fifth of white voters said they “strongly agreed.” Yet among those who agreed, 23 percent said they'd be supporting Obama.

“This result is reasonable if you believe that race is not as monolithic an effect as we might easily assume,” Franklin said, noting that 22 percent of those who “strongly disagreed” said they'd be supporting McCain.

Anecdotes from across the battlegrounds suggest that there's a significant minority of prejudiced white voters who will swallow hard and vote for the black man.

“I wouldn't want a mixed marriage for my daughter, but I'm voting for Obama,” the wife of a retired Virginia coal miner, Sharon Fleming, told the [Los Angeles Times](#) recently.

One Obama volunteer told Politico after canvassing the working-class white Philadelphia neighborhood of Fishtown recently, “I was blown away by the outright racism, but these folks are ... undecided. They would call him a [racial epithet] and mention how they don't know what to do because of the economy.”

The notion that there might be “racists for Obama,” as one Democrat called them, comes against the backdrop of a country whose white voters largely accept the notion of a black president.

“The economy is trumping racism,” said Kurt Schmoke, the dean of Howard University Law School and a former Baltimore mayor. “A lot of people who we might think wouldn’t vote their pocketbook because of race — now they are.”

“If you go to a white neighborhood in the suburbs and ask them, ‘How would you feel about a large black man kicking your door in,’ they would say, ‘That doesn’t sound good to me,’” said Democratic political consultant Paul Begala. “But if you say, ‘Your house is on fire, and the firefighter happens to be black,’ it’s a different situation.”

“The house is on fire, and one guy seems like he’s calm and confident and in charge, and that’s the only option,” he said.

That is, in less dramatic terms, more or less the campaign’s official talking point, a version of the longtime Democratic hope that class will — or at least should — matter more than race.

“Voters are less interested in the hot button and are more interested in the cooling economy,” said Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.), an Obama ally who is as on-message as his father is off.

But other, more nuanced, questions of race are also in play.

One senior congressional Democrat mused about prejudice among his own supporters. “They’ve all got one black friend,” he said, “and they won’t stop talking about their black friend.”

“That’s Obama,” he said.

And some argue that elements of Obama’s story and persona make him specifically acceptable to voters who hold broadly negative views of African-Americans.

“Not all whites associate the generic African-American with Obama,” said Ron Walters, a longtime student of race and politics and aide to the senior Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaigns. “They give him credit for having half a Caucasian ancestry, and give him credit for his education, and give him credit for his obvious ability to take complex subjects and parse them.”

The geography of racial conflict and tolerance has been a strong overlay of the electoral map. Obama has run better than past Democrats in prosperous states with little history of tension, such as Colorado and Iowa, and worse in working-class states in the Appalachian belt. His campaign has been structured around this dynamic and may actually have overestimated the number of white Democrats in the region unwilling to vote for him because of his race. Obama had ignored West Virginia, for instance, until a spate of positive polls prompted him to start advertising there this week.

Obama has also ignored Southern states with a history of deep racial division, from

Arkansas to Mississippi, in favor of those that have seen an influx of new voters from the

north — Virginia, North Carolina and Florida.

Until this fall, both campaigns viewed Michigan — a heavily Democratic state, but one with a history of tension between Detroit and its white suburbs — as Obama's Achilles' heel. In 2006, the state was deeply divided by a referendum to ban affirmative action. The measure was opposed by most African-American voters as an assault on hard-won gains, but it won broad support among whites and passed by a double-digit margin.

But earlier this month, McCain gave up the state for lost as economic concerns appear to have trumped racial ones.

"Obama's personality — his speech, his look — he provides [white voters] with a non-threatening way to move forward on this issue, and that's a very positive development," said David Waymire, who led the unsuccessful opposition to the anti-affirmative action initiative. "He is not Kwame Kilpatrick," he said, referring to the Detroit mayor who resigned last month after pleading guilty in a sex and misconduct scandal.

For black observers of American politics in particular, Obama's ability to win over voters who harbor negative views of African-Americans at large is a complex, but hopeful, sign.

"I didn't think the election itself is necessarily going to transport a lot of people, but I've been changing my view on that a bit lately," said Walters. "I've been in personal circumstances where I said to myself, 'I wonder if this person sees me differently because a black person is about to be the president of the United States?'"

© 2012 POLITICO LLC

