

What we didn't overcome on Election Day.

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What We Didn't Overcome

Obama won a majority of votes. He didn't win a majority of white votes.



Jesse Jackson reacts to Barack Obama's victory

Electing Barack Obama president was a glorious Jackie Robinson moment for the United States of America. Obama didn't just win; he became the first Democrat since Jimmy Carter to win a popular-vote majority. He won a larger proportion of white votes than any previous nonincumbent Democratic presidential candidate since Carter. Ta-Nehisi Coates, writing in the Washington Post's Outlook section, was moved to conclude that Obama's victory vindicated Martin Luther King's "belief in white people," a belief Coates once scoffed at as a sign of "weakness and cowardice, a lack of faith in his own."

As a white person, I accept with gratitude Coates' warm feelings. But I fear they may be a tad premature. While it's certainly true that enough white people voted for Obama to put him in the Oval Office, the blunt fact remains that a majority of white people did not. Although Obama beat John McCain in the popular vote by an impressive seven-point margin, McCain beat Obama among white voters by an even more impressive 12-point margin. Obama got 53 percent of the broad electorate to vote for him but only 43 percent of the white electorate. When I say "white electorate," I don't mean the white working class, or white Southerners, or any other subgroup whose capacity for racial tolerance has long been held suspect. I mean all white voters.

That strikes me as a hidden-in-plain-sight phenomenon that warrants greater attention. Yet surprisingly little coverage has bothered to note Obama's white-vote deficit. A rare exception was a Nov. 2 New York Times article by John Harwood ("Level of White Support for Obama a Surprise"), which quite appropriately predicted that Obama would fail to win a majority of white votes before moving on to the more hopeful news that Obama had made greater inroads among whites than most recent Democratic predecessors. The sad reality is that no Democratic candidate for president since Lyndon Johnson has won a majority of white votes (and even he lost 1964's white Southern vote to Barry Goldwater).

Am I saying that any white vote against Obama must be counted as racist? Of course not. White people have all sorts of reasons for deciding who they vote for, and most (though not all) white conservatives would have a hard time justifying a vote for any Democratic presidential candidate. Nor am I saying that all or even most Republican voters harbor racial prejudice against African-Americans. Although a majority of whites was never going to vote for a black Democrat in 2008, it's entirely possible that a majority of whites might have voted for a black Republican. (Remember the brief GOP frenzy to draft Colin Powell to run

against Bill Clinton in 1996?) More whites voted for Obama than for the very white John Kerry or Al Gore. That doesn't sound like racist behavior. It's Democrats who most whites dislike, not black people.

But in a more complex and indirect way, the stubborn refusal of a majority of whites to vote Democratic is all about race. Take a look at this chart. The alignment of whites with the Republican Party hasn't made it impossible for Democrats to win presidential elections, but it has made it fairly difficult. For the past 40 years, whites have made up 74 percent to somewhere north of 90 percent of all voters. Jimmy Carter got elected president by narrowing to four percentage points the gap between whites voting Republican and whites voting Democratic. Bill Clinton did it by narrowing the gap to a remarkable 2 percent. I don't think it's a coincidence that both men drew some appeal simply from being white Southerners. The South is where the GOP holds its tightest grip on the white vote.

It's no puzzler why Johnson was the last Democrat to win a majority of the white vote. He signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act into law, observing as he signed the former that "we have lost the South for a generation." (Actually, it's been two generations, and nobody would be surprised to see three.) What Johnson didn't allow himself to think was, "We have lost the white vote for a generation." (Again, it's been more like two.) Were LBJ transported to the year 2008, he would be deeply moved to discover that the United States had elected a black man president. But he would find it very depressing to learn that none of his Democratic successors ever won a white majority. Surely, he'd think, it's harder for Democrats to elect a black man president than to win forgiveness from the white majority for abolishing Jim Crow.

The good news is that my fellow Caucasians are aging out of their lock-step Republicanism. Obama failed to win a majority of whites (43 percent); or white men (41 percent); or even white women (46 percent), who are more open to voting Democratic. But he won 54 percent of all white voters age 18 to 29, to McCain's 44 percent. You'll note from the chart that the white majority among voters has been shrinking during the past 40 years, just as the white majority has shrunk in the general population. The three-point drop since 2004, though, is so dramatic that a likely explanation isn't demographics at all but rather a greater disinclination than usual among white folks this year to vote. Turnout in 2008 was about what it was in 2004, and, according to the Center for the Study of the American Electorate, the reason it wasn't higher—as widely expected, given the keen interest in this election—was that fewer Republicans went to the polls. The percentage of Democrats who went to the polls increased 2.6 percentage points while the percentage of Republicans went down 1.3 percentage points. The greatest favor the white race did Obama this year may have been to stay home. That's a far cry from Martin Luther King's dream, but it's a start.

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