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# Should Obama Worry About W.Va.?

By Michael Grunwald

Hillary Clinton's lopsided defeat of Barack Obama in West Virginia Tuesday night was not a surprise; the polls had been even more lopsided. And it didn't change the dynamics of the Democratic race; Obama's lead still looks insurmountable. But losing does have a way of making politicians look like losers, and the next primary in Kentucky looks like more of the same terrain that's been tough for Obama, heavy in older, working-class whites without college degrees. So the question of the moment has become: Do Obama's continuing struggles with those particular voters suggest potential problems for him in November?

The answer is quite likely no, because Obama won't be running against another Democrat in the general election. He'll be running against a Republican, and these days *American Idol* front-runner David Archuleta would have trouble getting votes as a Republican. But to the extent the answer is yes, it might have something to do with, you know, the factor we're not supposed to mention, the factor the Clintons keep getting in trouble for hinting at. It's just that Obama, well, this is awkward, but he's, um, black, and most voters aren't. According to exit polls, one in four Clinton voters in West Virginia said race was an important factor in their vote, which is amazing in an era where people who think like that aren't supposed to admit it. Shouldn't they at least have pretended their issue with Obama was that he is an elitist?

The good news for Obama is that he's still comfortably ahead in pledged delegates, that superdelegates keep breaking his way, and that despite the Clinton campaign's pronouncements, West Virginia won't change that. He barely mounted a campaign in the state, in part because he wanted to start campaigning against John McCain, in part because he knew he was going to lose; he even said so in Charleston on Monday. While Obama has consistently outpolled Clinton among blacks, young voters and college graduates, Clinton has been more popular among less educated blue-collar whites of a certain age. That sounds a lot like the so-called Reagan Democrats whose defections have hurt the party so badly in previous elections.

But the other good news for Obama is that his Democratic-primary problems in battleground states need not translate into general-election problems. West Virginia Democrats are still fond of President Clinton, and three-quarters of his wife's supporters said his campaigning was important to them. But Democrats are still likely to support a Democratic nominee in a Democratic year, and national polls suggest trouble for the G.O.P. in almost every state; President Bush's approval ratings are abysmal, voters trust generic Democrats more than Republicans on every major issue, and Obama and Clinton are both leading McCain even though they're busy fighting each other. Democrats recently seized congressional seats in conservative districts in Illinois and Louisiana; last night, they grabbed a Mississippi seat in a district that Bush carried 62-37.

What's been overlooked is that Obama has won plenty of white voters; otherwise he wouldn't have carried Iowa, Idaho, Colorado and Virginia. He won some white working-class voters, too, a lot more than Chris Dodd or Bill Richardson did; he just didn't win as many as Clinton, who tailored her campaign towards the "beer track" after Obama started drubbing her among wine-trackers. Over the next six months, Obama will have plenty of time to let those beer-trackers know that he comes from a middle-class family, that he started his career organizing laid-off steelworkers, that he's a regular dude who likes sports. He'll consolidate his union support, and he'll emphasize his plans to raise the minimum wage, preserve Social Security and turn around the economy. In West Virginia, exit polls showed that Clinton crushed Obama among women and voters whose top issue was the economy, but those are the voters who are more likely to support any Democrat in the fall. And Clinton signaled last night that once the nomination is decided, she won't play the spoiler: "I will work my heart out for the Democratic nominee."

And yet. One in four Clinton supporters essentially admitted to pollsters that they cast racist votes! Half the voters said Obama at least "somewhat" shares the crackpot views of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright—and these were Democratic voters! Barely a third of Clinton's supporters said they'd vote for Obama over McCain. Sure, they're in the heat of a bitter primary, and America is not West Virginia, and November's a long way off, and partisans usually end up voting the party line. But those are scary numbers for Obama. Even in New Jersey, Ohio and Pennsylvania, around 10% of Clinton's voters said race was a factor; not quite as disastrous, but certainly enough to swing an election.

There are plenty of voters who don't mind that Obama is black. And there are some voters who will never vote to elect a black President. One of the key questions in November, although it's not polite to ask out loud, could be whether Obama can do anything to increase his chances among voters who do mind his race, but might be persuaded to vote for him anyway. Elderly whites who might not have the most enlightened racial views might be swayed by warnings that McCain would privatize Social Security. Blue-collar whites might prefer Obama's economic policies. Surrogates like Jim Webb and Bob Casey might help with crucial

Scots-Irish and Catholic voters.

But one kind of appeal it's hard to imagine working for Obama is a racial appeal; he knows he can't win as the Black Candidate. I remember watching Obama in a school auditorium in Berlin, N.H., this winter, long before Rev. Wright became a household name. One aging hippie—after saying he hoped his question "doesn't seem odd in the whitest place on earth"—asked Obama if he would launch another "national conversation about race," as President Clinton did. And Obama said: No. "I'm less interested in a conversation about race in the abstract," he said. "All the self-flagellation, it's not useful. African-Americans get all riled up, and whites get defensive."

Of course, Obama ended up at the center of a national conversation about race, and in West Virginia, it hurt him. He'd rather converse about almost anything else.

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