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Bigotry?; Ugly election fallout

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AROUND America, various commentators are painting West Virginia in unflattering hues, alleging that mountain white prejudice was a large factor in last week's strong vote against black Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama.

In The Huffington Post, columnist John K. Wilson said "West Virginia's voters revealed that they are the most racist in the country so far in the Democratic primaries." Almost one-fourth of Mountain State voters admitted openly in exit polls that racial concern swayed their ballot choice - the highest rate found in any state, even in the Deep South.

TV comic Jon Stewart broadcast what one newspaper called "two or three jaw-dropping clips of interviews with white voters in West Virginia who said they wouldn't vote for the black guy under any circumstances."

The Tuscaloosa News in Alabama said white bigotry was "the elephant in the room" in West Virginia's presidential primary. Many commentators noted that this state is 94 percent white, with low education and modest income levels. One West Virginia woman appeared in national TV news saying she couldn't vote for Obama "because he's a Muslim." What woeful ignorance.

It's distressing that such an ugly image of the Mountain State is being displayed after the election. Frankly, we cannot believe that it represents average West Virginians, who tend to be tolerant, friendly, decent and accepting of everyone. We suspect that only the worst examples were selected for national airing.

Nonetheless, it's clear that Appalachian Mountain dwellers have attitudes somewhat different from America as a whole. A New York Times report titled "Skirting Appalachia" pointed out that white voters in the entire highlands region from New York state to northern Mississippi have rejected Obama resoundingly. "The region is whiter, poorer, older, more rural and less-educated than the rest of the country, and seems to be voting like a bloc," the report said.

Glaring prejudice against the black candidate was found in mountainous parts of Pennsylvania - and the pattern was forecast for Tuesday's balloting in Kentucky.

Some of this oldtime racism still lurks in West Virginia. But it belongs in the tainted past, not in today's era of genuine equality. Conscientious, tolerant West Virginians should strive to oppose the ugly remnant.

Former West Virginia legislator Charlie Peters, longtime publisher of The Washington Monthly, commented that many white, rural, West Virginia Protestants once disliked Catholics - but that prejudice faded greatly after Catholic John F. Kennedy swept the state's 1960 presidential primary.

We hope the same moral improvement wipes away lingering racism that dishonors West Virginia.

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