

Newsweek Poll
Race, Class & Obama
Princeton Survey Research Associates International

FINAL SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

April 26, 2008

After Hillary Clinton's big win in the Pennsylvania primary, the NEWSWEEK poll shows Barack Obama losing ground on a number of key survey measures. The double-digit lead for Obama in preference for the nomination among registered Democrats and Democratic leaners¹ has been reduced to seven points (48%-41%). Obama's favorability rating has dropped further since last week's poll. Four in 10 (40%) registered voters now say they have an unfavorable opinion of him. Only a week ago, the Illinois Senator was widely viewed as the Democratic candidate most likely to defeat John McCain. With another win in a big state, Clinton has cut into his advantage as the stronger candidate for the fall. Currently, 46% believe Obama is more electable while 38% give Clinton the edge. One week ago, Obama led on this measure by 55% to 33%.

REV. WRIGHT, BITTERGATE DAMAGING

Four in 10 (40%) registered voters nationwide now say there is "no chance" they will vote for Obama if he is the Democratic nominee. The impact of the Reverend Wright and Bittergate controversies is evident. Two-thirds of those who rule out voting for Obama say their opinion of him is less favorable as a result of reports about Wright, his former pastor (66%), and the comments Obama made about "bitter" small town residents clinging to guns and religion (65%).

SOME GOOD NEWS FOR OBAMA

There are at least a few pieces of good news in the new poll for Barack Obama, however. Despite the political damage he has suffered in recent weeks, Obama still edges out John McCain in a trial heat for the November election (47%-44%), and his rival for the Democratic nomination does no better. Clinton also has a three point lead (48% vs. 45%) over McCain in a trial heat. Hillary Clinton has not improved her favorability rating, and Obama remains the more popular figure with the broader electorate. Among all registered voters, opinion of Obama divides 53% favorable/40% unfavorable. This compares with 47% favorable/49% unfavorable for Clinton. And voters seem increasingly comfortable with the idea of a black man in the White House. Three-quarters (74%) of registered voters think America is ready to elect an African American president, a significant increase from one year ago (59% in July 2007).

DEMOCRATIC VOTERS DIVIDE BY RACE AND CLASS

The race and class divisions evident in the Pennsylvania Democratic primary exit poll are also seen nationally. In preferences for his party's nomination among all Democratic voters nationwide, Obama owes his lead to his big margin 62%-30% among non-whites. White voters favor Hillary Clinton by a 47%-41% margin. When the white vote is broken down by class, upper/middle class whites break for Obama 50% to 40%. But working class/poor whites back Clinton by a wide margin, 58% to 26%. Although they make up only about a quarter of all Democratic voters, downscale whites are critical to keeping Hillary Clinton in the race.

DOWNSCALE WHITES GO TO MCCAIN IN RACE AGAINST OBAMA

Last week's NEWSWEEK poll did not show much difference in general election preferences of whites by class depending on whether they are choosing between Obama and McCain or Clinton and McCain in the general election. Such differences by race and class, however, are more evident in the post-Pennsylvania

¹ Hereafter, this group is referred to as "Democratic voters."

primary poll. When the choice is between Clinton and McCain, working class/poor white voters divide their vote about equally (47% Clinton/46% McCain). But when Obama is the Democratic candidate, downscale whites break for McCain by a significant margin (53%-35%). Obama runs only marginally better than Clinton against McCain among upper/middle class whites. He trails McCain 51%-40%; she trails McCain among this same group by 54%-40%.

When voters are asked a different question about their voting intentions for the general election, upper/middle class white voters are most likely to say there is at least some chance they will vote for McCain (65%), followed by Obama (55%), and Clinton (51%). Working class/poor whites, however, rate their chance of voting for McCain (61%) and Clinton (55%) ahead of their chance of voting for Obama (48%).

FEW SAY OBAMA'S RACE AFFECTS THEIR VOTE

Barack Obama seems to have had some success positioning himself as a "post-racial" candidate. Although some voters may be likely unwilling to reveal their prejudices, the new poll finds little evidence that racism is the main reason for Obama's problems with certain white voters. When Democratic voters are asked if Obama's race affects their vote, 4% of working class/poor whites say it makes them less likely to vote for him, but at least as many (7%) say it makes them *more* likely to back his candidacy. In addition, all the measures on the poll gauging voter willingness to accept a serious black candidate show forward movement. As noted previously, growing numbers of voters say America is ready for an African-American president. Similarly, the proportion of voters who think an African-American could win enough white support to get elected today has increase to 67% from 60% last year. White voters and black voters are about equally likely to think an African-American candidate can get enough white support to win.

"ELITISM" CHARGES AGAINST OBAMA DON'T RESONATE WITH WHITE VOTERS

Leading into the Pennsylvania primary, there was much talk about Obama coming off as an elitist with his Bittergate comments, poor bowling performance, and even his eating habits. Is this the reason for his problems winning support from working class whites? The new poll results strongly suggest this is not the case. Voters were asked if each of the candidates "looks down on people like you." Just 31% of working class/poor whites say this description applies to Barack Obama, no more than the numbers who say it applies to Hillary Clinton (33%) or John McCain (31%). Voters were also asked a direct question whether they thought Obama was "an elitist" or "down-to-earth." Working class/poor whites chose "down-to-earth" by 53%-25%.

The new poll also tested whether voters in general and downscale whites specifically, were under the mistaken impression that Barack Obama was raised in a wealthy family. Only 17% of all voters and 20% of working class/poor whites are so misinformed about Obama's economic class growing up. The new poll also found that only 8% of all voters and 10% of working class/poor whites think Obama is the candidate most likely to favor the interests of the rich and powerful if elected to the nation's highest office. Downscale whites are more likely to see McCain (45%) and Clinton (29%) as the candidate most likely to work to benefit the "haves" rather than the "have-nots."

DOWNSCALE WHITES RELATE MORE TO CLINTON

More than just his race, Obama stands out from his Democratic rival for his somewhat exotic life story. While Clinton can talk about duck hunting in Pennsylvania as a girl and knock down shots of whiskey in a local bar, Obama seems awkward in his efforts so far to relate to less affluent whites (e.g. his bowling outing). Voters were asked if the three presidential candidates would "fit in well with people in your local community." Upper/middle class whites are somewhat more likely to see Obama fitting in as they are to feel this way about Clinton (54% vs. 48%). Working class/poor whites, however, are less likely to believe Obama would fit in than either Clinton or McCain (45% vs. 53% and 56%). The same pattern is found on the question of whether the candidates "share your values." For more upscale whites, Obama fills the bill as well as Clinton (47% vs. 44%). But downscale whites are less likely to see Obama sharing their values as his Democratic rival (44% vs. 50%), and McCain also scores higher on values than Obama (52%)

Democratic voters were asked which of the two candidates for their party's presidential nomination better "understands the problems and concerns of people like you." Barack Obama is the choice of non-whites

(56% vs. 28% Clinton) and upper/middle class whites (48% vs. 36%). But working class/poor whites feel more connected to Hillary Clinton (52% vs. 30%).

OBAMA'S WIFE, EXOTIC BACKGROUND PLAY LESS WELL WITH WHITES

As the campaign has moved forward, Barack Obama has taken some obvious hits (Wright, Bittergate) that have hurt his standing with white voters. In addition, as he has become better known, certain aspects of his life are playing less well with whites than with minorities:

- Michelle Obama is a plus for him among non-whites – 24% say what they have seen or heard about Obama's wife makes their opinion of him more favorable, 11% less favorable. But among white voters, her influence is more negative (15% more favorable/21% less favorable).
- His time spent living in Indonesia as a youth has a positive impact on non-whites (23% more favorable/6% less favorable), but it gets a mixed response from whites (16% more favorable/15% less favorable).
- His foreign-sounding name gets a mixed response from non-whites (7% more favorable/11% less favorable), but is more of a negative with whites (3% more favorable/17% less favorable).
- His major speech on race in America in response to the Wright controversy was as much a positive among non-whites as Wright was a negative (49% more favorable/10% less favorable). But white reaction was more muted (25% more favorable/16% less favorable) and 10% of whites claim they haven't heard about the speech.

Overall, about half (52%) of registered voters are aware that Obama is a Christian, while 13% think he is a Muslim, and 9% something else. That leaves a quarter (26%) of voters who say they don't know what religion he practices. Less than half (41%) of working class/poor whites know that he is, in fact, a Christian; and 16% of this group think he is a Muslim.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Results are based on telephone interviews with 1,203 registered voters nationwide. Interviewing was conducted April 24-25, 2008. The overall margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for results based on 1,203 registered voters. Results based on smaller subgroups are subject to larger margins of sampling error. The margin error is plus or minus 5 for results based on 592 registered Democrats and Dem leaners. In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting surveys can also introduce error or bias to poll results.