

Virtue In Action

“Is Martin Luther King’s Dream Being Realized in the 2008 Election?”

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FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

— Martin Luther King Jr.



2008 Presidential candidates
Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton



Election 2008: Striving for the Dream

Nearly 40 years after his death, we are coming closer to dream of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and in an event seizing the national stage.

In 2008, Sen. Hillary Clinton – a woman – and Sen. Barack Obama – a black man with an African father and white Kansas-born mother – are the top contenders for the Democratic ticket in the upcoming presidential election. The fact that Obama has received significant support from white voters and Hillary Clinton significant support from men demonstrates that voters are beginning to look beyond race and gender in evaluating candidates. This development would undoubtedly make Dr. King proud. The civil rights icon emphasized equality, **fairness** and **justice** for everyone and famously stated: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” (“I Have a Dream,” 1963, Washington D.C.)

Approximately 72 percent of white and 61 percent of black respondents believe the country is ready for a black president, according to a recent CNN/Opinion Research poll, which also revealed that 63 percent of both black and white respondents thought a female president could succeed. Earlier in the **primaries**, Obama shocked political analysts by triumphing in



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Iowa, a state that is over 90% white. “His stunning victory in the Iowa caucuses, in a state where more than 90 per cent of the population is white, was an unmistakable signal that racism is not the invincible thing that some seem to think it is,” wrote columnist Thomas Sowell in a *Windsor Star* piece titled *Billary vs. Obama*. “Unlike Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton before him, Obama has not been running as a black candidate for symbolic purposes but as a serious contender who happens to be black.”

These poll and primary election results demonstrate that we have made significant progress in moving beyond discrimination against blacks and women. However, we need to assess several other questions before declaring that we have achieved Dr. King’s dream of being judged by the content of our character, instead of by exterior traits such as race.

Is it a form of **discrimination** if voters make their choices based on wanting a black or female candidate to win, regardless of that candidate’s stance on the issues? Also, when pollsters and the media call attention to the candidates’ race and gender, even if it is to celebrate societal

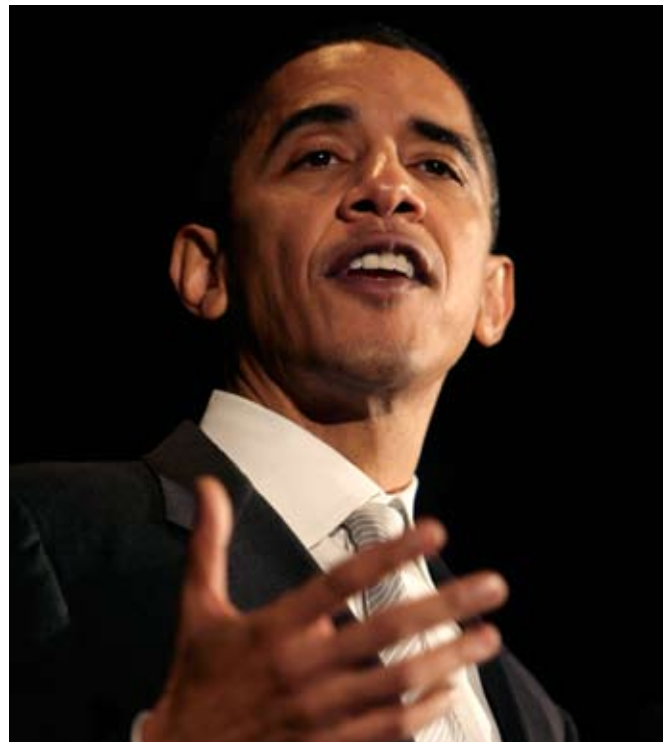
progress, does this undercut the true accomplishments of the candidates?

Both candidates have worked very hard to overcome racism and sexism in order to succeed, and that struggle cannot be underestimated. However, in order to truly overcome identity politics and deliver upon the dream, we cannot replace old prejudices with new ones.

Old Prejudice – New Prejudice?

Some political analysts claim the Clinton campaign tried to identify Obama as the black candidate in the hope that whites would then turn against him. Bill Clinton compared Obama’s success in the South Carolina primary to Jesse Jackson’s previous wins in South Carolina. The Clinton campaign denies they have focused on Obama’s race. Regardless of whether the Clinton campaign was trying to identify Obama as the black candidate, support for Obama has remained strong.

Instead of hurting Obama, is he actually benefiting from the view of him as a black candidate, especially within the black community? In most primaries Obama has received over 80% of the black vote. Voters may be voting for Obama because they agree with him more on the issues; however, we should examine whether some of his support is based on his simply being black, and not as Dr. King hoped for because of the content of his character or position on the issues.



Many political analysts also claim that some in the media have inappropriately and negatively targeted Clinton's gender, for example when MSNBC host Chris Matthews referred to her as "witchy" and likened her voice to "fingernails on a blackboard.."

On the other hand, Clinton has benefited in some ways as a result of her gender. Iconic feminist and founder of the Gloria Steinem wrote that Clinton "deserved" a presidential win due to injustices done to women since the times of Civil War. "Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot, and generally have ascended to positions of power, from the military to the boardroom, before any women (with the possible exception of obedient family members in the latter)," Steinem wrote in a New York Times opinion piece "Women are Never Front-Runners." (Jan. 8)

Clinton has also received the support of the New York state chapter of the feminist group National Organization of Women (NOW). The chapter rallied for Clinton in the wake of Democratic Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy throwing his support behind Obama.

"Women have just experienced the ultimate betrayal," the chapter said in a statement posted in on its Web site. "...Senator Kennedy's endorsement of Hillary Clinton's opponent in the Democratic presidential primary campaign has really hit women hard. ... He's joined the list of progressive white men who can't or won't handle

the prospect of a woman president."

Though the feminist support might aid Clinton – a mother and powerful senator—with female votes, those same words could alienate her from male voters, and in the case of Steinem's comments, even black votes, she would need to succeed.

The 2008 presidential primaries have already shown that we have come far in moving beyond extreme racism and discrimination against women. It is encouraging that both a black man and a woman have attracted widespread and diverse voter support. Now it is time to strive for an even higher level of **respect for others** and **fairness** in evaluating all candidates by the content of their character, their message and stands on the issues, and to not disadvantage or give an advantage to any candidate because of race or gender.

Perhaps Obama's grandmother, who lives in a small Kenyan village, could serve to teach us a lesson in **fairness** and **justice**. She exhibited the ideal virtue of **respect for others**, when, in an interview with CNN, the reporter asked her who should win out her grandson or Clinton. "Sarah Obama says the election is a contest and the best man or woman should win," the reporter wrote.

Hopefully, the American public will adopt the same attitude by Election Day 2008.

VOCABULARY

Fairness: playing by the rules. Take turns and share • Be open-minded; listen to others • Don't take advantage of others • Don't blame others carelessly

Justice: fair treatment, due reward or punishment in accordance with honor, standards, or law

Respect for Others: showing full appreciation of the worth and dignity of others; living by "the golden rule": do unto others as you would want done unto you

Primaries: a preliminary election in which voters of each party nominate candidates for office, party officers, etc

Discrimination: treatment or consideration of, or making a distinction in favor of or against, a person or thing based on the group, class, or category to which that person or thing belongs rather than on individual merit

Sexist: Discrimination based on gender, especially discrimination against women

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LESSON GOALS:

- Develop understanding of the virtues of respect for others, fairness and justice
- Help students see how race and gender should eventually be rendered obsolete in an equal and fair society
- Use the 2008 presidential election to show the progress this country has made, while demonstrating how much more is left to accomplish
- Inspire students to judge others fairly and not by physical attributes and other characteristics out of a person’s control



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is significant about Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sen. Barack Obama’s run for the Democratic candidacy? How does their candidacy relate to Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream?
2. Why is Obama’s win in the Iowa primaries significant?
3. How appropriate do you think it is for the media to focus on race and gender when it comes to describing the candidates or analyzing their actions? Are those attributes important? Why or why not?
4. Do you think Obama and Clinton are receiving more or less support because of their race and gender?
5. Do you think we can or should eliminate the reality of a candidate’s race in evaluating whether to vote for him or her?
6. Do you think we can or should eliminate the reality of a candidate’s gender in evaluating whether to vote for him or her?
7. How would you describe our progress as a country when it comes to racial and gender equality? What factors – other than the 2008 election – do you believe demonstrate progress or a lack of progress?
8. Why might Gloria Steinem’s words about Clinton alienate some voters? Do you think

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that America has more problems with racism or sexism? For whichever issue you picked, please explain why you think so. If they cannot be compared, explain why it is an unfair comparison.

JOURNAL WRITING QUESTIONS:

1. Write about a time when you feel you were discriminated against for any reason. How did it make you feel? How was it resolved? If it didn't get resolved, what do you think should have happened?
2. Write what you think Dr. King would have to say about coverage of Obama and Clinton during the presidential elections. Would he be pleased or displeased with current events if he were alive today? Explain your reasoning, based on your knowledge of King.

EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

1. Have the class read or listen to Dr. King's "I Have a Dream Speech," and then break into groups, with the leader explaining what we must do to achieve the rest of King's legacy via a 2-minute speech
2. Ask the class to look into the argument of early feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton who argued with former slave, and statesman, Frederick Douglass about who should get the vote first—freed black men or women. This will put the clash of race and gender into perspective, since the debate has raged on since post-Civil War Days. Ask them whether or not this is a fair argument.
3. Ask the class to come up with a way for voters to learn more about political candidates in a fair, unbiased way. Encourage them to find sources other than mainstream media and put together a brief presentation on how voters can educate themselves.
4. Break the class into small groups and ask each group to work together to track coverage of Obama and Clinton for one week on one television station or in one newspaper, keeping a clipbook or video log. Then ask them to make note of evidence where they see race and gender playing a clear role. You can have them deliver an oral presentation or create a chart to demonstrate how much attention is paid to race and gender. Have them explain whether they felt that coverage/attention had a positive or negative effect on each candidate, and whether the specific reference to race or gender should have been a part of the coverage.

INTERNET RESOURCES:

"Billary vs Obama," Thomas Sowell, The Windsor Star: <http://www.canada.com/windsorstar/news/editorial/story.html?id=2850e294-1697-42fc-b006-048f5ed7082c>

"Women are Never Frontrunners," Gloria Steinem, The New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/opinion/08steinem.html>

"2008 Race has the Face of a Changing America," Susan Page, USA Today: http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-03-11-politics-diversity-cover_N.htm

"Vote Shouldn't Focus on, Race, Gender," Kyra Kyles, <http://redeye.chicagotribune.com/red-020108-kyles,0,175263.column>

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