

Race, Reform and the 2008 Presidential Nomination Process

by Fredrick C. Harris, Director, CAAPS

The Center for African American Politics and Society presents the results of the first ever survey exploring racial attitudes toward the presidential nomination process. The study examines racial differences in opinions on the current system of selecting presidential nominees and gauges attitudes on whether the current process should be reformed. Additionally, the study reports findings on how feelings of group solidarity among blacks influence their candidate preferences as well as citizen's perceptions on whether the 2008 election cycle will produce a fair and accurate count of the vote. In the context of the African American politics, the 2008 presidential election cycle presents black voters with a unique opportunity to play a pivotal role in determining the outcome of the Democratic presidential primary, as well as the November general election.

Blacks' influence within the Democratic Party has changed markedly since 1964, when civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hammer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) challenged the all-white delegation of Mississippi Democrats at the party's convention in Atlantic City. While a concession was made by the national party to give the insurgent Democrats two seats, MFDP refused the offer, insisting that the concession would not adequately remedy the exclusion of black southerners in the party. Thus began the era of reforming the presidential nomination system to make the process more racially inclusive. The aftermath of the contentious 1968 Democratic convention led to reforms that called for transparency in the delegate selection process, greater participation by the party's rank and file, and better representation of blacks, women, and younger voters as delegates. Calls for greater participation, especially the move from "hand-picked" delegates to primary elections, also influenced the move toward a more democratic process of selecting delegates in the Republican Party, which also moved toward state primaries

in the 1970s.

While the presidential runs of Shirley Chisholm in 1972 and of Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988 were seen as insurgent candidacies within the Democratic Party, these candidacies brought more African Americans in the presidential nomination process and provided a means for blacks to set the agenda on issues they cared most about. While winning was not the ultimate goal, assuring that the party and the party's nominee would place on its agenda a commitment to civil rights, fighting poverty, economic justice, and urban revitalization were the goals of the insurgent candidacies. In 2008 the front-loading of presidential primaries in the first six weeks of the year has once again raised questions about representation and fairness in the presidential nomination process as well as whether the selection process needs to be overhauled and replaced with a more inclusive process.

The **Racial Attitudes and the Presidential Nomination Survey** finds similarities between blacks and whites on levels of satisfaction with the current presidential nomination process. Only a slight majority of both groups report that they are satisfied with the presidential selection process—53 percent of blacks compared to 54 percent of whites report that they are very happy or somewhat happy with the "series of primaries, caucuses, and conventions leading to the general election." A sizable minority—41 percent of blacks and 40 percent of whites—is somewhat or very unhappy with the present system. Similarly, when asked about whether states that have scheduled their primaries and caucuses earlier in the year make the process better compared to previous years, nearly 30% of blacks compared to nearly 20 percent of whites (19%) report that it's better because the schedule gives more voters a say. Thirty percent of whites compared to 19% of blacks think the process is worse because it gives primary voters less time to consider candidates. However, about an equal number of

blacks and whites—46% and 47% respectively—report that moving the process forward than earlier years has not made a difference in the process.

Different Evaluations on Candidate Values and the Process

While an equal percentage of blacks and whites generally support reforming the present system, their views diverge when asked what factors are important to producing their party's nominees. When asked is it "very important" that the system that the two parties use to select a president produces a candidate that is capable of winning an election, gives minorities a voice in the process, is ideologically pure, makes people feel good to be a member of their party, or recognizes the need for regional and ideological diversity on the ticket, blacks and whites have different perceptions.

Electability is a value deemed important by both blacks and whites, with blacks placing greater emphasis on the system producing a candidate who can win the general election. About three quarters of blacks (76%) compared to 65% of whites think that producing a winning candidate is very important. However, the starkest difference in responses is the importance placed on giving minorities a voice in the nomination process—about three quarters of blacks (76%) view this value as very important to producing a presidential candidate compared to 56% of whites, a difference of 20 percentage points.

We also see large differences in the importance given to producing a candidate that is "ideologically pure and won't compromise on issues." While less than half of whites (42%) think that this value is very important,

60% of blacks surveyed think that having candidates that are ideologically pure is "very important." For blacks views on ideological purity have a partisan cast—61% of blacks identify as Democrats in the survey. (Only 6% of blacks reported being a Republican and 24% declared themselves independents). Thus, blacks' preference for ideologically pure nominees is viewed mostly from their perspective as Democrats rather than Republicans. By a difference of 16 percentage points, blacks are also considerably more likely to think that it is very important that the system produces a candidate that makes them proud to be a member of their political party (62% of blacks compared to 46% of whites).

Diversity as a value in the process is reflected in the emphasis blacks place on what type of candidates should represent the party's ticket. Regarding regional diversity on the ticket, 61% of blacks compared to 42% of whites believe that a balanced regional ticket is very important. And although blacks are more likely to prefer their party's nominee to be ideologically pure, they are more likely than whites to embrace ideological diversity on the party's ticket. Sixty-three percent of blacks report that it is very important that the process produces a candidate that recognizes the need for ideological diversity compared to 40 percent of whites.

Alternative Systems for Nominating the President

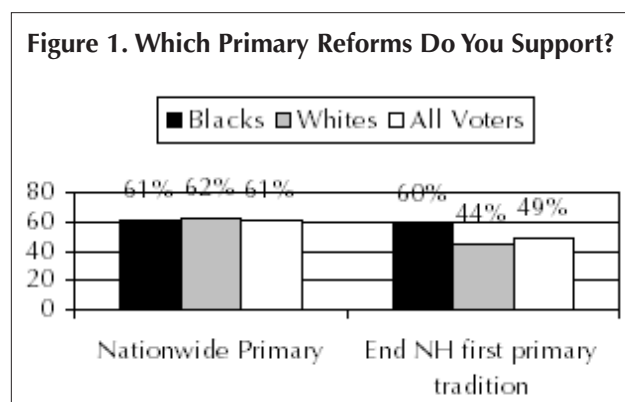
One of the largest racial differences in opinion is whether the tradition of New Hampshire holding the first presidential primary should remain. When asked, "do you think that the tradition of New Hampshire having the first primary should continue, or do you think it is time to change the tradition and allow other states to hold primary elections first before New Hampshire," nearly 60% of blacks think that the tradition should be eliminated compared to 44% of whites. Only about a quarter of blacks support New Hampshire remaining first (24%) compared to 37% of whites.

Although blacks and whites disagree about whether the New Hampshire primaries should remain first, both groups generally support alternative systems for selecting presidential nominees. A nearly equal percentage of blacks and whites believe that presidential candidates be chosen by voters in a single nationwide primary election. Sixty percent of blacks compared to 62% of whites strongly favor or favor a national primary while 32% of blacks and 30 percent of whites oppose or strongly oppose a national primary to select candidates.

There is relatively less support from both groups for re-

Table 1. Candidate Values and the Nomination Process
% saying very important that the process produces a candidate that...

	Black	White	All
Is Electable	76	65	66
Gives Minorities a Voice	76	56	58
Won't Compromise	60	42	45
Makes Proud to be Party Member	62	46	48
Supports Regional Diversity on Ticket	61	42	45
Supports Ideological Diversity on Ticket	63	40	45
Number of Respondents	502	1028	1420



gional primaries and for staggering primaries from the smallest to largest states. When asked if it would be better or worse if individual regional primaries were held during different weeks during the presidential year, slightly more blacks (46%) than whites (41%) think regional primaries would be very good or good. Forty-six percent of blacks and nearly half of whites (49%) think it would be a poor or very poor idea. When offered the idea of a system based on the size of a state's populations, differences between blacks and whites emerge. The new system would work as follows: "The smallest states would begin holding their primaries February, the small states would begin in March, medium sized states could begin in April and the biggest states would begin in May." Fifty-four percent of blacks think it would be better compared to the present system compared to 45% of whites.

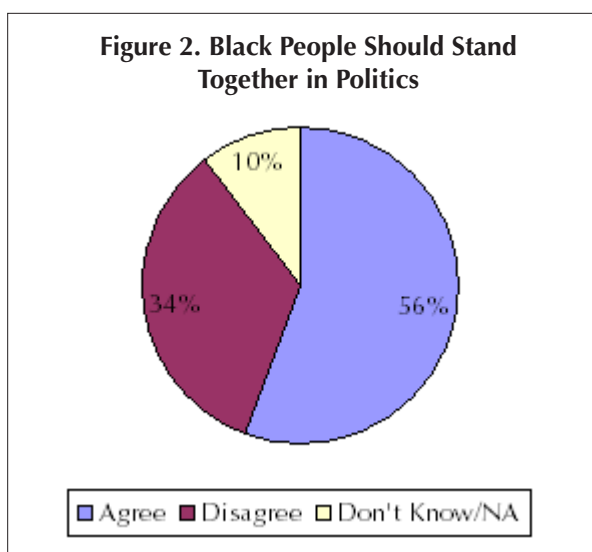
Candidate Preferences and Black Solidarity

At the time of the survey, black Democrats were evenly divided in their support for Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama. Thirty-seven percent support Senator Clinton while 38% percent support Senator Obama. About 2 percent support former Senator John Edwards. For white Democrats, 36% support Senator Clinton, 20% support Senator Obama, and 13% of white Democrats support Edwards. Twenty percent were undecided.

How feelings of black solidarity affect the voter preferences of African Americans in the primary contests remain to be seen. Results from the study indicates that most blacks see group politics as a problem in American politics and are divided on whether all blacks should stand together when it comes to politics. When black respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with whether "the trouble with politics in the U.S. is that it is always based on what group you are a member of," 72 percent agreed or strongly agreed while 16 per-

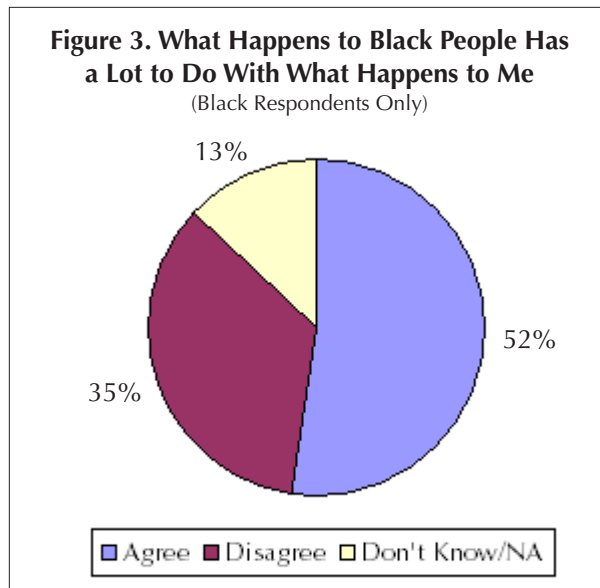
cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, a little more than half of blacks (55%) reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that when it comes to politics all black people should stand together. A third of blacks (34%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

It is also less clear how a strong sense of shared fate with other blacks translate into voter preferences, especially as it relates to support for black candidates. When asked if they agreed with whether "what happens to black people has a lot to do with what happens to me," 52 percent of blacks agreed or strongly agreed with the statement while 34 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, the belief in standing together in politics or having a strong sense of shared fate with other blacks does not necessarily translate into unfettered support for black candidates. In the survey a large majority of blacks—84 percent—reject the idea that blacks should always vote for a black candidate when possible; only 7 percent of blacks support this idea.



Therefore we see that Black Democrats who prefer Senator Clinton and Senator Obama exhibit the same level of black solidarity. Indeed, when estimating the percentage of black Democrats who express a preference for the two leading Democrats and exhibit a high degree of black solidarity, there is virtually no difference in support given to the two candidates. Of black Democrats who support Senator Clinton, 63 percent agree or strongly agree that black people should stand together in politics; for Senator Obama 60 percent agree or strongly agree that black people should stand together.

And when estimating candidate preferences based on feelings of shared fate with other blacks, the estimates are also virtually the same. Fifty-seven percent of black



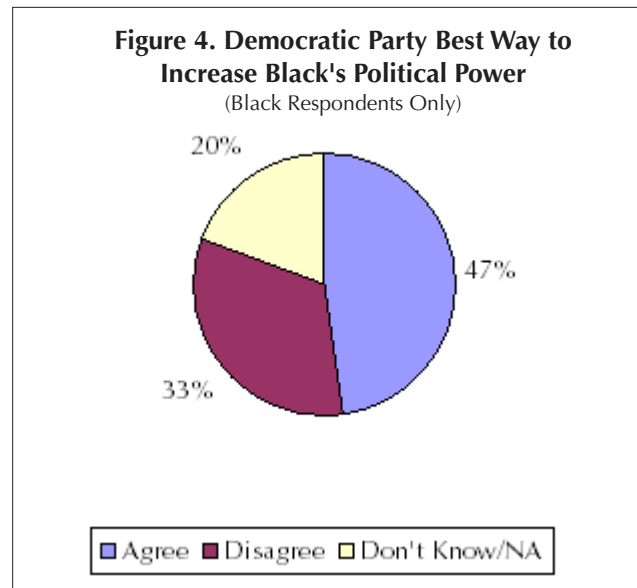
Democrats who support Senator Obama agree or strongly agree that what happens to black people in general will also affect them personally while 57% of black Democrats who support Senator Clinton also report a strong sense of shared fate with other blacks (56%). Clearly, feelings of black solidarity does not affect whether blacks support Senator Clinton or Senator Obama, who is the nation's first viable black candidate to run for the presidency.

Democratic Party Best Strategy for Black Political Empowerment?

While blacks have made strides within the Democratic party over the past decades and are one of the party's most loyal voting constituencies, black respondents in the survey do not anonymously agree on whether the best way to increase the political power of blacks is to continue to support the Democratic Party. While less than half (47%) agree or strongly agree with increasing the power of blacks through commitment to the party, a solid minority—33%—disagree or strongly disagree.

Less Confidence in the Vote Count

As reflected in the contested votes in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, blacks report less confidence in whether votes in the 2008 presidential election will be fair and accurate. Nearly half of blacks (46%) think the vote count will probably not or certainly not be fair compared to nearly a quarter of whites (24%), a difference of 22 percentage points.



About the Survey

This survey is based on a nationally representative sample with 1,420 respondents and an over-sample of African Americans. The survey, conducted by Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas Inc. (SRBI), was fielded November 16-December 13 of 2007. The black over-sample is comprised of two portions. A total of 156 interviews were completed via standard Random Digit Dialing (RDD) methods, with respondents drawn from telephone exchanges with an African American population of 15 % or more. The second portion of the black over-sample (N = 264) was drawn from households identified in early surveys (ABT SRBI/Time polls) as including an African American. Owing to random selection of respondents within households, the respondent in the early survey was not necessarily selected for the interview in this project. From the RDD over-sample, the ABT SRBI/Time polls respondents, and the African Americans in the primary RDD sample, 502 African Americans were interviewed. The estimated margin of error for the nationally representative sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points and plus or minus 5 percentage points for the black over-sample.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank James Gibson of Washington University in St. Louis for inviting me to have this study be part of a larger study on American's attitudes toward the presidential nomination process and Tom Ogorzalek for providing assistance for this report.