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Stereotypes: Racism and its effects on the 2008 presidential election and our citizens

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Stereotypes: Racism and its effects on the 2008 presidential election and our citizens

Abstract

This is such a historic time in our country's story, due to the reprieve from the usual choice of middle-aged White males in a presidential election. The make-up of candidates' age, race, and sex in the 2008 primaries and general election, allowed the unique opportunity for multiple stereotypes to be engaged. This was an exploratory qualitative study, relying on descriptive data, participant observation during the general election campaign, and in-depth interviews (N=8) that happened within six months after the election of Barack H. Obama, first African-American elected president of the United States. The purpose of this study is to examine the influences stereotypes of race had on the 2008 presidential election. My finding was that the preponderance of negative stereotypes in the campaigns counter-intuitively catalyzed the positive discussion of race.

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STEREOTYPES:
RACISM AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
AND OUR CITIZENS.

By

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ABSTRACT

This is such a historic time in our country's story, due to the reprieve from the usual choice of middle-aged White males in a presidential election. The make-up of candidates' age, race, and sex in the 2008 primaries and general election, allowed the unique opportunity for multiple stereotypes to be engaged. This was an exploratory qualitative study, relying on descriptive data, participant observation during the general election campaign, and in-depth interviews (N=8) that happened within six months after the election of Barack H. Obama, first African-American elected president of the United States. The purpose of this study is to examine the influences stereotypes of race had on the 2008 presidential election. My finding was that the preponderance of negative stereotypes in the campaigns counter-intuitively catalyzed the positive discussion of race.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the historical significance of electing someone who has an affinity for and genetic background in Africa—the mother continent of American slave descendants—one could not help but wonder what effects stereotypes had on the citizens that volunteered to work in the various campaigns or voted in the 2008 presidential election. The use of stereotypes in the 2008 presidential election became very apparent to me as a casual observer early on in the campaign process. This seemingly deliberate injection of racism by political parties, media sources, and my fellow citizens motivated me to take a more scientific look at how the use of stereotypes may have affected others.

Importance of Stereotypes

The *Survey of Social Science Sociology* links attitudes of people to the development of their stereotypes. It notes that an “attitude is an evaluation or opinion, regarding a person or thing, that affects one’s thoughts, feelings and behaviors” (Magill & Delgado, 1994, p. 2221). Our attitudes are valuable in understanding others that may be different from us, but they at times can lead to the acceptance of stereotypes. A stereotype is “a standardized mental picture held by members of a group that represents an oversimplified, critical, or prejudicial judgment about members of another group; stereotypes are often used to legitimize discrimination” (Magill & Delgado, 1994, p. 2242).

A more in-depth definition from the *Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology* describes a stereotype as:

A rigid, oversimplified, often exaggerated BELIEF that is applied both to an entire SOCIAL CATEGORY of people and to each individual within it. (The word is borrowed from the printing process in which one impression is used to stamp out many exact copies.) ... Stereotypes are important because they form the basis for PREJUDICE, which in turn is used to justify discrimination and both positive and negative ATTITUDES.... Stereotypes are often regarded as undesirable because of the prominent role they play in SOCIAL OPPRESSION based on characteristics such as RACE, GENDER, ETHNICITY, and AGE. [Emphasis as per original] (Johnson, 2000, p. 312)

Stereotypes can also be related to *generalizations*, but the major difference between the two is that generalizations may be benign, helping someone form a basis of interaction with other groups, while a *stereotype* is usually used to produce negative social interactions.

The *SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies* explains how a stereotype can become:

A vivid but simple representation that reduces persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits and is thus a form of representation that essentializes others through the operation of power.... Stereotyping commonly involves the attribution of

negative traits to people who are different from us, a process that points to the operation of power in stereotyping. In particular it highlights the role of stereotyping in the exclusion of “difference” from the social, symbolic and moral order since stereotypes commonly relate to those who have been excluded from the “normal” order of things. Stereotyping thus simultaneously establishes who is “us” and who is “them.” (Barker, 2004, p. 188)

As not only an observer but also a volunteer in the 2008 presidential election, I noted an overwhelming number of instances that demanded a line of inquiry into stereotypes regarding race.

Political Effects of Racism

The primary instances of stereotyping in the 2008 presidential election dealt with race. Gwen Ifill, in her book *The Break-Through Politics And Race In The Age Of Obama* (2009), discussed the many threats that were made on Barack Obama’s life and how he needed “Secret Service protection earlier than any other candidate” that had ever run for president (p. 59). Ifill, like Obama in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), also acknowledged that some of our nation’s biggest changes have been forced through racial conflict. Ifill further argued that racism is the major liability for a person of color in politics, and that the stereotype of their color may come not only from another, but even their own race. Even though Obama tried to address race in a broader sense during the campaign, Ifill documented the many incidents of outright racism against Obama that emerged during his successful run for president. Additionally, many African-American and bi-racial politicians must face a test from other African-Americans and Whites; this “Black Tightrope” is something that White candidates never have to walk.

The first question—usually directed to African Americans by African Americans—was frequently an upside-down identity test: “Are you black enough?”.... The only thing more politically debilitating than the “black enough” question is the “too black” question. The latter is seldom asked out loud, and it is never asked by black people. It is, however, the question that can cost mainstream black candidates an election (p. 159–172).

Finally, Ifill also acknowledged that, contrary to the tradition of Black politicians, Obama was able to walk that tightrope, and somehow use the same arguments to appeal to both Black and White voters. While Ifill argued that racism was the most important facet a candidate of color will face, Brown-Chappell (1997, p. 3) and the seminal work of Wilson (1985, p. 543; 2000, p. 79) postulated that the main cause of racial tensions was a battle of the haves and have-nots, and race evolved as a proxy for class, especially post-President Reagan.

One could argue that Obama's success relied on his predecessor, Jesse Jackson, who opened the door for an African-American to be taken seriously as a candidate in 1984 when he ran for President. Jackson also helped show that a presidential election can be seen as a battle between the haves and have-nots of America. Many people believed that Jackson lost his party's nomination because voters felt he focused too much on the issue of race and not enough on class. In the book *The New Black Politics—The Search for Political Power*, Barker (1987) pointed out that many people also thought Jackson was not qualified and that he did not have enough experience to be president. Older readers will recall that many people brought up Jesse Jackson's connections with the prominent Black Muslim Louis Farrakhan and other critics of American society, while also spreading fears of how he might drive away the White vote (especially those of southern Whites). There was even mention that the extreme and widely publicized media coverage in 1984 prevented these issues from dissipating quickly (p. 34). All of these issues faced by Jackson parallel arguments that were made against Barack Obama decades later, despite Obama's strenuous efforts to avoid making his race a focus in the

campaign. How these damaging stereotypes again took center stage deserves further investigation.

Barack Obama, in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), argued that “rightly or wrongly, white guilt has largely exhausted itself in America.” Even liberal Whites who would like to see racial inequalities end will be turned off when racial victimization is practiced outright by candidates of color. This is because most Whites do not believe that they discriminate against people of color; all White candidates assert that they stay *colorblind*, and an African-American will not help his cause by making Whites feel guilty about the past history of their race (p. 247). Obama understood this and knew that by recognizing the disparities of class, and ensuring that our laws apply equally to everyone, we can better demonstrate the adversities faced by many, especially people of color. Most importantly, Obama argued that Americans can be racially neutral while still principled, and that if we target the challenges facing *all* Americans it can go a long way towards closing the gap created by racism. Because of these factors and his biracial upbringing, Obama had a desire to transcend our nation’s racial history: “I think about America and those who built it. This nation’s founders, who somehow rose above petty ambitions and narrow calculations to imagine a nation unfurling across a continent” (p. 361—362). Obama recognized the vast amount of American energy that went into abolishing slavery, and continues to go into uprooting old, ignorant biases. This is a big reason why, unlike past African American’s that tried to win their party’s nomination, Obama chose to try and keep the focus away from racism in a direct sense during his run for office, and only to mention it in the context of broader issues when it could no longer be avoided. To

Obama, it had become apparent that the thing that should be focused on is our similarities as Americans, not the differences of our skin colors.

“Yet a black candidate...must also be exceptionally aware of the ‘politics of style.’ The candidate must maintain the interest of and support minorities while not alienating white voters” (Henry, 1987, p. 90–91). In the book *The New Black Politics—The search for Political Power*, Henry showed that, despite a substantial projected lead in polls, a popular African-American candidate such as Tom Bradley can lose an election apparently due solely to his race. At the time, data showed that Black voters were known to vote more for White candidates than White voters would for Blacks (p. 90). Yet the majority of Whites, when they were polled, said that they would vote for Bradley. When it came time for the election and the voters stepped into the voting booths, White voters apparently went against what they said to the pollsters and Bradley lost (p. 77). This phenomenon was later named the *Bradley Effect*.

More recent research on how race is an influence “on the political attitudes, behavior, and institutions of both blacks and whites” has mainly focused on partisanship values, how people are represented politically, and their opinions on policy (Hutchings & Valentino, 2004, p. 383). White voters may not vote for Black candidates based on assumed policy initiatives, rather than on color alone. Research conducted by Brewer and Stonecash has noted that African-American voters are strongly committed to the Democratic Party, while the White voters (especially in the South) have in recent decades abandoned the Democratic Party.

Two major hypotheses have been proposed to explain this change. The dominant explanation in recent years has been that race issues have driven whites from the

Democratic Party in the South. In this view, defections from the Democratic Party have occurred because whites oppose the party's positions on race issues. In contrast, others have suggested that class divisions have emerged as important, with affluent whites increasingly supportive of the Republican Party because they find its positions more compatible with their interests. (2001, p. 131)

To look at the demographics of red (meaning recently predominated by Republican voters) and blue (meaning recently predominated by Democratic voters) states in the 2008 election, at least one, if not both, of these hypotheses still appears to be valid.

Joan Ferrante found that stereotypes could be one of the simplest ways to create in-groups and out-groups. In her book *Sociology: A Global Perspective* (2005), Ferrante states that:

Sociologists use the term ingroup to describe a group with which people identify and to which they feel closely attached, particularly when that attachment is founded on hatred for or opposition toward another group known as an outgroup. Ingroups cannot exist without an outgroup. An outgroup is a group of individuals toward which members of an ingroup feel a sense of separateness, opposition, or even hatred. Obviously one person's ingroup is another person's outgroup. (p. 121)

Some of the most compelling recent research has shown that if people have a narrow identification with their own racial group, it can influence the way that they may vote. Consistent with this research, Amy Goldstein noted in a *Washington Post* article that the 2008 Democratic primary was marked by racial differences in voting preferences: "Black voters overwhelmingly preferred Barack Obama, a Black candidate, whereas Latinos and Asians largely favored Hillary Clinton, a White candidate" (as cited in Zhong, Galinsky, & Unzueta, 2008, p. 1563). One can come to many conclusions about the mechanisms that foster statistical minorities to vote for certain candidates, but the results of recent studies have shown how "negational identity" (which means that even if an individual cannot agree on who they are, they often can agree on who or what they are

not) is an important source of minority identity within society, and can have a far-reaching impact on decision making by these individuals (Zhong, Galinsky, & Unzueta, 2008, p. 1564). This research is intended to answer the question of how racial stereotypes may have shaped individual voting habits in the 2008 Presidential election.

Hence the present study seeks to explore the effects that racism had on the recent 2008 presidential election by combining a qualitative interview method with a participant observation design. The analysis will focus on how the color of a candidate impacts the judgment of both voters of their same race and voters from other races. It will also look at whether the negative and positive effects of stereotypes influenced in-group and out-group attitudes among voters and volunteers for the campaigns. Finally the analysis will search for the effect that the stereotype of racism could have played and whether fear and threats of violence against a candidate could impact voter rationale.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Three methods were used for this study, and consisted of participant observation, in-depth qualitative interviews (N=8), and demographic surveys. Participant observations were conducted as a volunteer, prior to and on Election Day, for both the John McCain and Barack Obama campaigns. District delegates, campaign leaders, and volunteers acted as a “snowball sample,” as they referred others who were willing to participate for interviews.

The Eastern Michigan University College of Health and Human Services Human Subjects Review Committee reviewed and approved informed consent prior to any interviews being conducted. The election took place on November 4, 2008, and

interviews began May 11, 2009. Participants were limited to those who had managed, volunteered, or voted in the 2008 presidential election. Six of those interviewed were referred to the study by others who had participated in the interviews. Two were volunteers that I met during time spent as a participant observation volunteer. Participants were either contacted by phone or e-mail to ask if they would be willing to participate in this research project; if they agreed the interview was then scheduled and they were e-mailed further information that would prepare them for the interviews.

I gathered information using demographic surveys to verify that the diversity of interviewees was maintained, and that no one group was represented much more than another while choosing future interview participants. Additionally, my mentor provided oversight during all stages of this research. She specifically read all transcripts and reviewed my manuscript to mitigate against researcher bias, and to better ensure construct validity.

Unstructured Participant Observations

I gained access to the McCain and Obama campaigns from either the presidential candidate's websites or other political organizations. I chose campaign sites located within fifty miles of my residence. I wanted to participate in both the McCain and Obama campaigns in order to get a balanced view of participants. Participation was from October 25 to November 4, covering multiple campaign headquarters and hundreds of miles. My participation in the McCain campaign was through phone canvassing (the campaign sites I visited reserved door-to-door canvassing for certain volunteers), while my participation in the Obama campaign was only door-to-door canvassing, because the campaign sites I volunteered at had enough phone canvassers. Subsequently, my observations were

skewed, because more time was spent around McCain campaign volunteers while staffing phones with them. Even though I requested to do both types of campaign tactics for the two candidates, the same form of canvassing was consistent for each site visited.

Qualitative Interview Sampling

I gave my contact information for future interviews to people from both campaigns. None of the McCain volunteers contacted me for interviews. Only a couple of the Obama volunteers contacted me to be interviewed for this study. The rest of the volunteers for both parties were referred by others that participated in the study. People who did not volunteer, but only voted in the election, were also contacted, since people that volunteer for campaigns might have a stronger party affiliation than the average voter. In order to do representational sampling of those interviewed, and have as much variety as possible in the limited sample of participants, a grid was kept of race, gender, age, and other demographic characteristics.

Interviews were either conducted at the participant's residence or a secluded office at their place of employment. Participants were asked to give an hour of their time for the interview process prior to volunteering, but time spent to complete the interview and survey process averaged forty-five minutes. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that gauged the participant's motivations in volunteering for a campaign or voting for a candidate, while others asked for instances of stereotypes they noticed during the campaigns, and if these instances affected their views of the candidates and how they voted. To view interview questions and contact info for the research approval process, see the Appendix.

Table 1: Interview survey demographics

Pseudonym	Volunteer / Voter	Gender	Age	Race	Education	Geographic Location	Political Party	Profession
Connie	Obama Volunteer	F	56-65	White	Masters	Urban	Democrat	Educator
Erick	Obama Volunteer	M	26-35	Bi-Racial A-A/White	Masters	Suburban	Democrat	Social Worker
Mack	Obama Volunteer	M	56-65	African-American	Masters	Suburban	Democrat	Retired State Worker
Maria	Obama Volunteer	F	46-55	White	Bachelors	Urban	Democrat	Secretary
Chrystal	McCain Volunteer	F	26-35	White	Bachelors	Rural	Republican	Secretary
Arial	McCain Volunteer	F	66-75	Chaldean	Associates	Rural	Republican	Entrepreneur
Daniel	Election Voter	M	26-35	Mexican-American	Undergrad Student	Urban	Constitution Party	Student
Barry	Election Voter	M	36-45	Bi-Racial White/A-A	GED	Rural	Independent	Unemployed Construction

Data Analysis

I reviewed the interview transcripts and participant observation field notes in order to find and better understand themes in the motivations and observations of volunteers and voters. The analysis of data consisted of five steps:

1. All transcripts were read multiple times.
2. Themes were found and noted.
3. A code system was created using initials and key words.
4. Data display was sorted into files that have codes in them.
5. Findings were divided by themes.

Research Limitations

The ability to generalize from this study is limited by unavoidable practical constraints, given the few resources available to an undergraduate student researcher. One limitation was the small sample number of participants that were interviewed and observed. Although efforts were made to diversify the small sample according to political affiliation, gender, and race, the fact that all of the data were collected in one particular state according to convenience sampling raises questions about the impact that the politics and economic status of that particular state could have had on the viewpoints of the participants.

There is still an ample amount of coded material, not used in this report, which touches on racial stereotypical judgments that could have implications to social welfare. There was also data collected through the participant observations and interviews that produced information on the stereotypes of sexism and ageism. Due to the limited eleven-week time frame of this study these themes could not be sufficiently explored and will be a focus of future research study.

FINDINGS

My question was: how did a stereotype, such as racism, affect voter/volunteer rationale during the 2008 presidential election; I sought to answer this question through participant observation and qualitative interviews. The participant observation allowed me the opportunity to be engrossed in the process that volunteers went through in the campaigns and afforded the opportunity to gain insight into their shared thoughts and/or views of the candidates. By conducting interviews with those who had participated, I gained a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of volunteers and voters during

this historic election. The following section will focus on three main themes on the stereotype of racism.

Color Alone

All of the interviewees, no matter their age or gender, commented on how their race or color had significance that shaped who they were. Most of the interview participants, and a few of the people that I observed while volunteering for the Obama and McCain campaigns, either talked about or experienced situations where Obama was referred to by his color alone. The Michigan volunteers from both campaigns noted the importance of Obama's color.

Obama and Race.

With the Obama interviewees, the element of race came as a surprise to which they took offense. Four individuals from different walks of life illustrated the importance of the negativity that race had for their candidate. One of the older Obama volunteers, an African-American man named Mack, who lived through our nation's racial tensions of the 1960's, probably had the best quote about how issues of color had hit the forefront of this election when he said: *"I suppose the thing that comes to me most clearly at the moment was the joke that if Obama wins, will they still call it the White House!"* This thought was also conveyed in a more graphic way when Mack talked about watching the news and seeing people carrying signs with images of the White House and a watermelon patch in front of it to depict an Obama presidency.

Erick, who managed a campaign for Obama, noted that the issue about the color of his candidate was confronted many times. *"There were definitely folks that would be like directly to my face, I am an African-American man knocking on their door, and they*

would say to me, I would never vote for a Black man.” A situation other workers also reported in interviews. Erick, who traveled extensively for the campaign, did note that, overwhelmingly, people were positive, even beyond the borders of Michigan but *“there were still definitely some kinds of overt, outward, no hidden or behind the scenes kind of stuff, where people were racist to my face.”*

Daniel, the Constitution Party supporter, reported hearing many people talk about how they would vote for McCain instead of Obama. You could see how much this situation still upset Daniel when he said: *“The sad part about that was a lot of those people didn't really think that McCain was the best person for the job, but Obama's skin color got in the way.”*

Another Obama volunteer, Connie, commented *“they have code-words... and I think it's just fascinating when people can't be honest and say how they feel about a Black man being president.”* One of her clients said *“What's so special about voting for somebody whose culture was never president before; there is a reason why this group of people were never elected before.”* When Connie questioned what the person meant by “this group of people” the client re-directed, explaining that she meant *“people from Chicago (heavily urban and African-American).”* These are just a sampling of the many responses about the effects of the color of a candidate on voter's attitudes that were given by Obama volunteers.

McCain and Race.

The theme of color also came up among McCain volunteers, but it was viewed more matter-of-factly. The insights below derive from their disparity with the Obama supporter's surprise and offense. These McCain volunteers and supporters, in contrast,

seemed to consider their position with some amount of righteousness. I believe that since I was volunteering, they assumed that I also held the same opinions they did. Also, since I present as a White person, it seems possible the volunteers were more comfortable being *honest* with their views.

While working the phones during Election Day at a suburban McCain campaign headquarters, one of the male volunteers mentioned that *“the media is full of hogwash, and I’m not sure why they are so biased.”* This was followed up by an older White woman: *“Me neither, we have to find a way to attack them, this guy has too much Muslim blood.”* To which the same gentleman replied *“more like Black.”* I overheard this same theme at other McCain headquarters during the heat of the campaign, as well as on Election Day. In terms of integration, I only noted a couple of younger Asian gentlemen at the McCain campaign locations. I did observe Whites and African-American’s, as well as other people of color, at the different Obama headquarters.

When leaving a suburban McCain office, I noticed that there was an older male African-American security guard working in the lobby. I asked the security guard if he, by chance, had noticed any people of color coming in and out of the volunteer office when he was on duty. The security guard kind of chuckled at this question, and then proceeded to point to his left hand and said *“That office has been open to the volunteers since August, and since August, I could not count on one hand the number that I have seen come out of that office.”*

Arial, a Chaldean McCain volunteer and delegate, commented that she believed the Democrats never used the correct label that much to describe Obama, because it

might have been to their disadvantage. *“I think that it is interesting that they never put it up that he was biracial. They stressed that he was Black when he was half White, and that was quite interesting because I never really did understand that.”*

Chrystal, a White McCain volunteer who held a highly influential position in the Republican Party process, commented: *“It hurt me to hear some of my fellow Republicans saying such negative, hateful, disgusting things against this man that they didn't even know [Obama].”* She also stated that she was glad Detroit was not the only city that Obama visited while he was in Michigan. This response seemed like it inferred that because Obama was African-American, he might have only visited the largest city in Michigan, which is also known to be predominately African-American. When this was redirected back to the interviewee, she began by stating that people who are not from Michigan always think Detroit is the capital because it is the largest city. After a few more comments Chrystal noted *“I think Detroit, because you know, it may have very well been some subconscious thing because he is African-American.”* Chrystal further noted how even though her parents tried to raise her not to see colors, her ninety year-old grandfather only voted for John McCain because he was a White male. Chrystal also stated that he is now having a hard time accepting that he has a Black man as his president. This illustrates how ingrained our perceptions of others can be, even to a person who tries not to see people racially.

Positive and Negative Aspects

Stereotypes can be both positive and negative, and I noted a theme of the race of the candidate being seen the same way. This theme went beyond just the color of the candidate. There were over forty different responses on negative and positive aspects of

racism by *all* of the participants that were interviewed. Below are a few of the situations that contained positive affinity for a candidate.

One unique situation that was so distinct it needed to be featured was that of Erick, an interviewee who, like Obama, was bi-racial. Erick discussed the historic speech Barack Obama delivered on race when the controversy sparked by Reverend Jeremiah Wright (Obama's pastor) could no longer be ignored, due to its perceived incendiary racial overtone. Erick commented how the after-effects of this speech were something that he hadn't ever seen on a national scale before:

So I think, that in and of itself, changed conversations and changed the dialogue so that ultimately, and hopefully, there is some kind of significant movement over race issues in this country.

The other positive outcome from the use of stereotypes that was conveyed by Erick came when he told the story about his interactions during the campaign working with others from different ethnicities and gender. Erick related how staff became fascinated with learning more about politics and asking questions about Barack Obama and his background. Erick stated that the women talked about “*conversations where people were saying they were not going to vote for Barack Obama just because he was Black*” and that these conversations and the fact of trusting Erick to give them the truth allowed the women to talk to him about the negative racism that they had witnessed.

So they came to me to ask for specific facts, and they would bring the e-mails, racial e-mails about you know he [Obama] had been a terrorist or other kinds of things, and they bring them to me and say okay explain this, what was the facts around this, and so I would bring them the facts.

Mack, an Obama interviewee, started out by talking about how he felt that few of his fellow African-Americans supported Obama early in the campaign process because

they thought that Hillary Clinton was a shoo-in candidate to win the presidential election. *“Barack Obama was too early and even though it was good to see him out there, it just wasn’t going to happen.”* When things started to change in the primaries, Mack started looking more closely at his choices and commented how he really felt more like supporting an African American. Mack discussed how he really looked hard at both Obama’s and Clinton’s policies, and started to find that even though they were close, he could agree with Obama more.

To me I have icing on the cake, because I had somebody who has policy I can agree with, somebody who is going to enact changes that I thought were really necessary, and he was somebody that happens to be African American, so it was like—YAY [laughs].

This shows a positive affinity to race even though Mack agreed with policies of both candidates. Overwhelmingly though, race seemed to have a negative impact of in-group and out-group situations.

As with most stereotypes, the situations in this study usually dealt with negative aspects more than positive. Seeing that in-groups are identified with people of the same race or background, and out-groups are seen as different from them, the data showed multiple themes and situations where racism came up. My literature review had not prepared me for this finding from Connie, an Obama volunteer who was Jewish. She noted a great deal of race based in-group formation in her community, even though it was a relatively small Jewish community that is notoriously liberal. Connie said that Hillary Clinton was familiar with and accepted by Jews because she would've never been elected as a U.S. senator from New York State without their support. Connie stated: *“A lot of the Jewish community was very concerned that he [Obama] was against Israel and they said a lot of pretty ridiculous things about him.”* She also commented how people in her

community thought that Obama would be biased against them and their religion should he win the election. *“But then there was all the other stereotyping about his real religion and the minister or the pastor and what that person said about what Barack should stand for, so I saw tremendous amount of stereotyping over that.”*

Maria, another Obama volunteer who was White, suggested that media personalities get away with publicly venting their hateful and oppressive stereotypes about people in their out-group. Still clearly frustrated six months after the election, she noted:

The talk show host thought he was very clever in seeing how he [Obama] does not represent Black America, because he's educated, and that does not represent Black America.... It just really made me angry, for him to be promoting that thought process.

Another one of the interviewees, Erick, showed the significance of in-groups and out-groups as a bi-racial person. He discussed feeling a connection with Barack Obama. Erick said his holidays alternated between races, when the families would get together: *“we would have a certain kind of food, and a certain kind of music, and a certain kind of culture, on one day and then the next day it was something completely different.”* This was his unique experience for his whole life. Erick noted, *“it really showed me that there's good and bad, there's right and wrong, kind of no matter where you're at. You know there's racial prejudice and things like that, and stereotypes on both sides.”* Erick, like some other interviewees, also hit on the fact that, from within their in-group, there is sometimes an expectation that politician's of color will not be accepted by their out-group:

It was interesting because the hardest people to talk to about Barack Obama were African Americans. It was because they all had this kind of idea that a Black man would

never be elected president, and it was very difficult to have those discussions with African Americans about the viability of Barack Obama.... So the more that I think about it on a racial perspective there is an interesting dynamic that the African Americans who may have wanted to see an African American in the White House at some point, they didn't really give Barack Obama much of a chance.... So I guess when I think about racial stereotypes it was almost this inward, kind of self-oppression piece from African Americans from the very beginning.

Daniel, a Mexican-American interviewee, believed that he had personally experienced out-group and in-group situations during the campaign. He seems to illustrate that Hispanics were also being sanctioned verbally for not conforming when he stated:

Because of the election it was almost like racism had resurgence really, or at least that's what it seemed like to me.... Whenever people would ask me, like, so are you voting for Obama? If I said "no," they would say how can you not vote for him, are you a racist? I mean how stupid is that, you know? I just personally don't want to vote for him, that doesn't make me bad, it just means that I have different opinions and that should be okay.

For Daniel, like many others interviewed, this was a very sensitive subject that highlighted how unstable in-group membership can be. Daniel noted that many of his Black friends didn't want to vote for McCain because he was White and there was finally a "Black guy" running for president, and that they just had to vote for him because of that. This belief became even more apparent when he stated:

I always thought that people who only wanted to vote for somebody because of their skin color was a dumb reason to vote for that person, and I saw a lot of that in the election, you know.... No matter what, even if he wasn't as qualified, and that is bad for our democracy...it showed me that people still are not accepting of somebody because they might be different.

Chrystal, the McCain volunteer, highlighted a situation where she attended a rally and was shocked by the language of another McCain volunteer, "someone in our group used the N-word towards Obama. I couldn't believe it; I was just like 'holy cow'". This upset her so much because it was someone in her same general age group, and she did not

think that they would talk like that here and now. Chrystal later discussed an incident from earlier in her life: *“You know, I grew up in a town where when I was 11 years old, the KKK burned a cross in my neighbor's back yard, because they were Black.”* This is yet another example of how, like many of the others discussed in this section, Chrystal kept coming back to situations where she had witnessed patterns of in-group and out-group struggles. But Chrystal also talked about how she had broken from the patterns of her in-group.

Unlike the other volunteers, Chrystal was the only one who discussed actually voting for someone in the 2008 election who was not from her party affiliation. Chrystal gave a great example of how in-groups that you belong to can become out-groups. During the interview she stated that when McCain pulled his campaign out of Michigan and did not support the bailout of the automotive industry, his action forced her to re-evaluate her allegiance to him. This political act, and some of the attitudes of other Republican Party members that she knew, caused her to look more closely at Barack Obama, and ultimately vote for him:

It opened my eyes to the fact that you have to give everybody a fair chance. You can't vote for somebody just because they're with one party, I can't just go and vote for somebody because they're Republican or I can't not vote for somebody because they're a Democrat. It's important to research and to take a look at the whole spectrum of what goes on, and I believe that's what my stereotype was, because I was sticking with my party, because that's what I've always done. This was an important election for us, our country.

Finally, Barry a bi-racial Independent voter stated: *“I sometimes think that everybody looks at everybody else in a stereotypical way. I don't consider myself prejudice, on one hand, but I guess in some ways, we all still are to some extent or another.”*

Fear and Violence

In both campaigns, interviewees consistently observed an undercurrent of fear and violence. Many Obama volunteers voiced the fear that Barack Obama's election would also result in his assassination. Further quotes by interviewees also recounted the fear of, and for, Obama, they'd encountered. Erick, the Obama campaign organizer, stated:

I think when I was knocking on doors is probably where I seen most of the direct kind of conversations around race, you know there were some things that were ideological and political in thought or interest. [But] People were saying that you know he [Obama] was like the devil.... I mean everyone was getting stuff, I got that Muslim terrorists e-mail a million times.

Daniel commented:

The thing that really made me sick was...for a long time there were a lot of people that said because of his name being "Barack Obama," he sounds like one of those terrorist guys...there were a lot of people that were just terrified of the fact that the guy who could be president could actually be Black.

Finally, Mack commented about watching television and hearing about "*the kill him comments at the Palin rallies*" which were overheard by some of the people in attendance. Mack mentioned how there were a fearful number of people, that couldn't accept the fact that a Black man with a Muslim sounding name might be the leader of their country.

Some McCain volunteers stated that they feared the thought of seeing Barack Obama being elected president. Volunteering at a suburban McCain campaign post, a well-dressed elderly woman sat down at the phone bank and started openly talking about many stereotypical situations. Perhaps because of a climate of fear and violence, the first thing that this prim and proper looking woman, "Betty Jean" (name changed), said to me was "*how many negative people have you talked to on the phone so far?*" I let her know that it wasn't any yet. Betty Jean then said "*I hope there is a silent majority of*

Republicans; this is scary.” When asked what she meant by that comment, she said, *“Obama wants to make a civilian-security force just like the brown-shirts”* (a reference to Hitler and the Nazi Party). Even after I explained my dual volunteer and observation-research role to her, Betty shared: *“I am so afraid that if Obama wins, he will ban our Rush Limbaugh and O’Reilly”* (Two well-known conservative media personalities).

After a few minutes Betty Jean also explained the fears of some of her acquaintances:

I have been talking to a lot of older people lately that are telling me how scared they are because they think Obama will be elected. I feel so bad for them; I keep praying to God that he won't win this election. I can't believe that after 9/11 people are going to vote for that Muslim. And that preacher of his is just as big a racist as any White person could ever be. God help us if he wins this election, we will have a Hitler running America.

Betty Jean continued to share numerous situations about her brother and how she wished he would quit teaching in Detroit (predominantly Black) because she feared for his life. She also noted that while making McCain polling calls, she talked to recent Russian immigrants who were going to move from America if Obama wins. Betty Jean informed me they had left their home country to escape communism, and they were not going to live with it here in the United States of America.

When asked, all of the people who were interviewed admitted to witnessing some form of stereotype being used during the 2008 presidential election, but none (with the possible exception of Chrystal) admitted that stereotypes motivated them to change their vote.

DISCUSSION

Despite a clear history of strong African-American support for the Democratic Party, many people observed or interviewed stated the only reason African-Americans voted for Barack Obama was because of his skin color. Daniel (as many other voters have) came to the conclusion that this group was only voting for the Democratic candidate because of the color of Obama's skin. A broader public understanding of the works of researchers like Ferrante (2005), Henry (1987), Ifill (2009), Goldstein (2008), and especially Zhong et al. (2008)—“negational identity”—would help us all to look beyond our differences. This knowledge would allow us to break away from the groups who keep us from looking at others and ourselves realistically, as Chrystal did. With this we therefore gain the opportunity to have a better understanding of and respect for each other.

Many interviewees' comments are consistent with Brewer and Stonecash (2001), whose qualitative research findings were confirmed, and who noted that African-American voters are strongly committed to the Democratic Party. This in no way is stated to insinuate that Whites are not committed to the Democratic Party as well; it just shows that proportionately more African Americans support the Democratic Party than not (since the 1940s). After making the observations and hearing comments from the different volunteers, it is hard not to deduce that the color of a candidate's skin weighed on the decisions of many to either vote or not vote for Barack Obama. But, it does not clearly show whether this was out-weighed by the voter's political party partisanship.

Generally, it was found that the interviewee's often agreed with the theoretical perspectives of Ifill (2009), who demonstrated the racial dilemma faced by African-

American candidates who must garner votes from both Whites and Blacks. As noted in the literature review, the work of Ferrante (2005) and Henry (1987) suggest that in-group and out-group behaviors might have been the phenomena exhibited within both campaigns that could be observed during participant observation and reported by interviewees. The work of Goldstein (2008) and Zhong (2008) also showed that the 2008 Democratic primary was marked by racial differences in voting preferences for people of color. So it can be hard to really pinpoint the effects of in-groups and out-groups on voter behavior for candidates. Even though there are so many variables that could affect how one group of people looks at another, the coded material from the interviewees still showed situations that could be related to this phenomenon with both positive and negative stereotypes.

Finally, Erick, the Obama campaign staffer interviewee, offered insight about racism that contrasts to the results I originally believed negative stereotypes would produce. Erick hit on two different aspects of how stereotypes, which may have been perceived as negative, could bring positive attitudes or situations out of them. This was a pleasant scenario to discover. It is also important to observe that Barack Obama seemingly had learned lessons from past African-American presidential candidates and tried to avoid making race a central issue of his campaign (Barker, 1987; Obama, 2008). What started out as negative portrayals of a stereotypical racial matter, transformed into a positive situation for fostering open and honest conversations among people from different races. These situations lead to people searching for the truth behind information disseminated as an attempt to negatively sway their opinions. This indeed was one of the most pleasant surprises found in my inductive search for answers on the influences that negative stereotypes had on the 2008 presidential election and our citizens.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WELFARE PRACTITIONERS

One of the most important implications to see is that negative stereotypes are not always bad because they can spark conversations between groups of people that may otherwise never happen, as Erick showed, the most important thing is not to always try to be politically correct. What is truly important is that we are open, honest, and sensitive with each other in order to obtain a spirit of unity. Ethics are the core of social work as a profession. Through education as a student of social work you gain a deeper respect for the inherent dignity and worth of others, and come to understand the importance of cultural competence. This research suggests that social work professionals must be vigilant and proactive in times of racial ambiguity and leadership changes. That is, they may wish to foster critical thought about stereotypes, in-groups and out-groups, and retool perspectives on the meaning of race to include the sentiments of bi-racial consumers and colleagues. The Social Work Code of Ethics section 4.02 focuses on discrimination, and states:

Social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability. (NASW, 1999)

Finally, the re-emergence of fear and violence in public discourse about policy and race may represent a contemporary opportunity for social workers to provide administrative and policy leadership.

CONCLUSION

The research has shown that there is no doubt that stereotypes are significant and do have an effect on how people not only see others, but even themselves, and how it is that they fit within our society. For this exploration into the impacts that stereotypes had

on the 2008 presidential election and our citizens, it could be safely deduced that:

Generally, across race, sex, age, and party identification, the interviewees and volunteers observed were seemingly guided by party first and then stereotypical situations played a part. It would be reckless to say that stereotypes of racism changed the way that people voted. It would also be naïve to believe that they did not have an effect on the election and our citizens.

This research project was an inductive process driven by the desire to discover explanations for, and gather insights into, the effects of stereotypes on the 2008 presidential election and the people studied. Several preliminary conclusions are:

- The make-up of race, sex, and age in the candidates caused many people to soul-search about whether they themselves held stereotypical beliefs.
- The witnessing of stereotypes allowed the opportunity for many people to feel comfortable enough, so that they could talk to those from other races and genders about their differences.
- Stereotypes caused many people to look at candidates from the other party more than they would usually do. This created less partisanship and more critical thinking.
- For many of us, our beliefs can be a lot more important in selecting the candidate that we vote for than even their policies.
- Methodologically, my racial identity was ambiguous enough that Whites felt free to make many stereotypical statements; one wonders what this portends for the methodology of qualitative interviewing in racially charged situations.

- Neither voters nor volunteers fell neatly into racial voting groups separated by the candidates color, as had been the tendency among American voters for most of the last 100+ years.
- Some Whites ignored the “Bradley Effect” and voted for a Black person, but in this limited instance *no* Blacks reported voting for the White candidate.
- In-group and out-group did play a role, but my findings are suggestive that new phenomena may be at play particularly for bi-racial individuals. Also, Whites have sub-group interests outside of race alone, i.e. Jewish.
- Fear and violence related to racial representation in the office of the president was documented by Ifill, then more recently witnessed on television during the campaign, and seems to be currently unfolding during armed citizen demonstrations by primarily White individuals protesting presidential policy initiatives.

In conclusion, the hostile and often overstated personal traits characterized through stereotypes of politicians and people in general are usually used to change attitudes of others, or gain power over a certain sector of society. This research presaged recent events related to Obama and other political figures such as his Supreme Court Appointee Sonia Sotomayor. Further research into the effects of stereotypes on politics and our citizens most definitely needs to be conducted. The ability of researchers from different genders, races, and political affiliations to work together on a focused study of stereotypes would definitely give a more balanced look at how it is that stereotypes can affect voter rationale.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Identifying the race and gender of research subjects was fundamental to answering my question, but this researcher realizes it could be considered itself a stereotypical approach by adding this information to the study. It was felt that it would be valuable in avoiding confusion if the readers also have an idea of this background.

I also want to acknowledge that in this study the terms “Black” and “African-American” are used interchangeably. Those interviewed and observed were quoted with the term that they used, and I tried to follow their word choice when commenting. Out of respect, all references to race are capitalized, unless it is a direct quote from an author in the literature review; in that case, whatever way the author chose to write the racially identifying term is how it appears in this study.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

- How has your ethnicity shaped your view of yourself?
- Often people stereotype others; did you notice any in the recent Presidential election.
- If yes, could you please describe all of them that come to mind and how they were disseminated, such as television, print, word of mouth, etc.? (Probe: If no response or unclear of what a stereotype is: *A stereotype is a label given to a person, or a judgment. It goes hand in hand with bias, prejudice, and discrimination and it is often incorrect and/or offensive.*)

- What would you say is your political stance? (Do you associate with a certain political party view, if so how?)
- What was your main motivation in volunteering or voting for a candidate in the 2008 Presidential campaign?
- What were the biggest influences to your decision of not voting for a certain candidate in the 2008 Presidential election?
- What were the biggest influences to your decision of who you voted for in the 2008 Presidential election?
- In what way, if any, did participating in the 2008 Presidential election change your conscious or make you more aware of the way that you look at stereotypes?

After asking all questions: "Do you think that any important things were left out of this interview? If so, which topics do you feel needed to be added?"

Contact Information for Research Approval Process

The research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Gretchen Dahl Reeves (734) 487-0077, Interim Chair of CHHS-HSRC, chhs-human.subjects@emich.edu