



The exit polls: Why Obama won

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It's the demographics, stupid: The black candidate won the black vote. The white woman won white women. The white man won white men.

Iowa, where Sen. **Barack Obama** of Illinois won women and whites, seems a world away.

The Democratic coalition now seems to be split by little more than the color and gender of its voters. It has been decades since the political left has faced such crass intraparty demographic divides.

Still, exit polls conducted by The Associated Press and the television networks reveal that Obama's success in South Carolina may have been because of blacks but it was not limited to them.

He won eight in 10 African Americans. But he also won independents, moderates, youth — and 27 percent of white men and 22 percent of white women.

There is no mistaking, however, that just as Sen. **Hillary Rodham Clinton** of New York could not have won New Hampshire or Nevada without the overwhelming support of white women, Obama could not have won South Carolina without the overwhelming support of blacks.

He won the same percentage of African Americans that he did in Nevada last week. But blacks cast 15 percent of the votes in Nevada — and more than half of the votes in South Carolina.

That white voters split between the three leading Democratic candidates made the black vote especially consequential.

Obama also benefited from a lack of gender gap between black men and black women, with both backing him equally. Clinton had hoped that her outsized strength among white women might translate to their black counterparts.

Black women were the largest bloc of voters Saturday night, roughly three in 10. Black men made up roughly two in 10. Clinton did win those blacks who did not support Obama.

Obama won every level of income and education and beat Clinton handily among voters who named Iraq, the economy and health care as their most important concerns.

In Nevada a week ago, Clinton and Obama split voters who prioritized the economy and Iraq; Clinton won those who said health care.

In South Carolina, Obama won on all three issues by 20 to 30 points.

Regardless of how the electorate is cut, South Carolina was a story of race. As recently as early December, Clinton was competing for the black vote.

A third of voters said they decided whom to support in the last month. That shift proved the load-bearing wall of Obama's victory.

Exit polls also revealed that race permeated not only votes but outlook, as well. Six in 10 Obama voters thought the country was ready for a black president, three times the amount who supported other Democrats.

But half of Clinton's voters said the country was "not ready" for a black president, while a quarter of [John Edwards'](#) and Obama's voters said the same.

Obama also won the vast majority of the quarter of voters who thought the country was not ready for a female president.

The African American vote was so strongly tilted in Obama's favor that Clinton's traditional strengths — including the support of white women and on issues such as health care — were effectively negated.

It was only among voters 65 and older that Clinton defeated Obama, 40 to 32 percent. The senior vote also made up nearly a fifth of voters Saturday night, providing a vital base that allowed Clinton to remain competitive in South Carolina.

Only the young transcended racial lines. Obama won more than 65 percent of voters under 29 years old. He did it in large part because he won half of the white youth vote. In fact, white youth were twice as likely to support Obama as were whites between 30 and 59 years of age.

That could be because young voters pay less attention to race in deciding who to support, but young voters have also long been the base of support for the insurgent candidate, from Eugene McCarthy to Howard Dean, who challenges the party favorite.

But once again, the power of the youth vote did not match the hype. They made up 13 percent of the electorate, continuing a decline in youth turnout since its high point in Iowa.

For all the chatter about Obama's challenges in reaching beyond the black and youth vote, Clinton faces her own demographic hurdles.

No factor was more crucial to Clinton's defeat in South Carolina than the small turnout of white women — 27 percent, compared with 38 percent in Nevada and more than half of the electorate in New Hampshire.

White women are the largest bloc of Democratic voters, but black voters remain a sizable portion of the electorate Clinton will face over the next month. Her strength with Hispanics may partially counterbalance her weaknesses with African Americans, which is what occurred in Nevada.

But Clinton continues to have problems with Democratic white men.

Edwards, a former North Carolina senator, ended up winning 44 percent of white men, the first time he won this bloc during the 2008 primaries.

Clinton has lost Democratic white men in three of the first four contests.

Part of Obama's strength has been that he won Democratic white men twice. In the coming Feb. 5 contests, when more than 20 states will vote, retaking this white male bloc will be vital for Obama. But so will winning young women and again dominating the black vote.

In comparison, Clinton's front-runner status depends on holding together every generation of white women, remaining competitive with white men and winning Hispanics.