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White Men Seen All Wrong

Washington analysts are beginning to notice a curious fact of the Democratic race. In a primary contest between the first black or female nominee, white men are the critical swing vote. Yet despite white males still disproportionately representing us in politics, we still misunderstand them as voters.

There remains a chasm between our conception of the powerful executive and the reality of the everyman. Our culture continues to define the typical white man more for his vice than virtue. The perception of the "angry white male" has not left us. Many still remain apprehensive to discuss white men as a constituency. They are, after all, supposed to be the reason we have to focus on constituencies. Even many pundits who viscerally understand these men, like Chris Matthews, have recently misperceived what motivates this bloc's choice between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama.

This past weekend, on his weekly Sunday morning show, Matthews asked writer Gloria Borger: "Is there a resistance to an African-American candidate by white men? Is there resistance to Hillary?"

Borger replied: "...I think the answer is yes and yes."

The facts demonstrate otherwise. In the Democratic primary white men have been the most willing to shift between the two candidates.

In the two-dozen Democratic primary contests where delegates were at stake, and exit or entrance polls took place, Clinton lost Latinos twice and white women three times (all by narrow margins). Obama, meanwhile, has never lost blacks. It has only been white men who have consistently swung between Obama and Clinton.

White men have backed Obama in 10 contests, most recently in Wisconsin. They supported Clinton in 12. More importantly for Obama, the momentum is with him.

Obama has won white men in the past three primary races. Yet his strength with white men did not wholly follow John Edwards exit from the race. Obama won the most white men in New Hampshire and Iowa. Nationally, however, Clinton was still holding a steady amount of support. By February, Obama began to overtake her.

The Gallup Poll has found that Clinton's support has hardly shifted among white men or women since mid January. In comparison, Obama has improved 23 percentage points with white men and 15 percentage points with white women. Clinton now wins white women by 11 points over Obama. But Obama wins white men over Clinton by 17 points. End result: nationally Clinton went from a double-digit lead over Obama to a double-digit deficit. Obama has captured Edwards and other Democratic candidates' supporters.

In a turn of fate, the candidate whom focused on women will have to win more men to revive her candidacy. And her chance is swiftly fleeting.

Two surveys out this week by Public Policy Polling demonstrate how crucial white men will be in Texas and Ohio this Tuesday. Even Clinton's husband acknowledged she must win both states to remain seriously competitive.

Clinton leads Obama 64 to 31 percent among white females in Ohio, while white men split evenly between the two. In Texas, Clinton leads with white women 50 to 45 percent while Obama leads with white men 58 to 37 percent. Both reflect his recent white male support in Wisconsin and Virginia.

The steady stream of Democratic white men away from Clinton's candidacy is forcing her to win a remarkably high amount of Hispanics and white women. That strategy is now failing her. Obama has won 10 contests in a row. The month didn't begin this way.

White Men as Swing Voters

At the onset of February white males were the sole constituency split between the two candidates (little more than 45 percent support for each). For other groups in the coast-to-coast primary on Super Tuesday, six in 10 Hispanics and white women backed Clinton.

Only 35 percent of both groups voted for Obama. Meanwhile, at least eight in 10 blacks have backed Obama. The gender gap for minorities is negligible.

In effect, the largest swing vote in this race has been talked about the least. Representation is not conversation. Simply because white men are talking on television doesn't mean white men are being discussed. A Nexis search of the past two months of news transcripts from CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News showed Hispanics or Latinos came up 851 times in the context of the names of Clinton and Obama. In that same context and time span, white male or white men came up 127 times.

The central problem with much of the analysis is not that white men are the only group shifting toward Obama. He has improved with white women and Hispanics. But white men have been essentially left out of the Democratic conversation,

despite them constituting a larger share of Democratic voters than all Hispanics and blacks combined.

That chasm between influence and attention is a bad omen for the political left. Democrats need to narrow the white male gap in the general election. Demographics are simply not changing fast enough to ignore these men, as Democrats have strategically done since at least 1984.

"We should have a candidate who actually appeals to white independent men," Obama pollster Cornell Belcher told me in a recent conversation.

Indeed. White men are so critical in the Democratic race because they are so heavily represented among independents. On Super Tuesday, white women were 35 percent of independents and an equal share of Democrats. White men however were only 24 percent of Democrats. But they were 36 percent of independents. Within the overall electorate, white men are, by at least 5 percentage points, the largest portion of all independent voters. They are the untold swing vote.

White Men, Obama, and the Democratic Past

That Obama has proven more capable of winning white men of late, particularly independents, is germane to the general election ahead. Overwhelmingly, the voters who left the Democratic Party in the past half century are white working and middle class men. The outcome of the 2008 presidential race will depend on whether Democrats can win a portion of these men back.

"The irony is whether its Clinton or Obama, the big swing group in the fall is going to be white independent men," Republican pollster Kellyanne Conway told me. "I wrote a book called *What Women Really Want* and I'm the first to admit it's going to be about men."

Many political reporters, a good portion of which are white men, have become so accustomed to seeing the world in the constituencies of identity politics that they often fail to identify the constituency that still shapes our politics. And when they do notice white men, reporters all too often get it wrong.

The media only recently began to take note of white men after a front-page story last week in the *Wall Street Journal*. The [article](#) correctly explained that many of these white men left the Democratic Party in the Reagan era. Then it erroneously stated that Bill Clinton "won many of them back to the Democratic Party in 1992."

In fact, Clinton did not. Exit polls actually show that in 1992 Bill Clinton won essentially the same portion of white men as Michael Dukakis in 1988. It was Ross Perot who siphoned off these men, as well as a lesser portion of white women, and undid George H.W. Bush.

History matters because it shapes our conception of the present. Democrats have not competed for white men since Watergate and the Ford-Carter race. But in a year where the Republican Party and its standard bearer remain remarkably unpopular, as a war led by Republicans is out of favor with the public, during a struggling economy stateside, and at the 40-year mark of the Republican majority (no presidential coalition has lasted more than four decades), Democrats have their best opportunity since Carter to regain a majority. Yet that grand Democratic ambition will only be realized by winning more white men.

Not Only a Southern Problem

Before any relationship can be mended the breakup must be properly understood. The bulk of the white men voting in Democratic primaries are not the same white men who migrated from the Democratic Party in the last half century. Those men left Democrats and took a presidential majority with them.

As I discuss my book, *The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma*, with readers I continually run into one common misconception. It was born of a Paul Krugman [column](#). In it he argued that only Southern white men left the Democratic Party. In short, the New Deal coalition collapsed because Democrats lost hick sexist bigots.

Of course bigots left Democrats, but not all of those who left Democrats were bigots. Let's finally put this factoid to rest.

In more detail [online](#), Krugman referenced correspondence with Princeton's Larry Bartels on white men. Bartels wrote: "unless you have a peculiar nostalgia for the racially coercive Democratic monopoly of the Jim Crow era, it makes sense to focus on the rest of the country. There, the Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote among white men was 40% in 1952 and 39% in 2004." Krugman added: "White men didn't turn against the Democrats; Southern white men turned against the Democrats. End of story."

But it was not the end of the story. Soon many of the political left, like *Nation* editor Katrina Vanden Heuvel, [accepted](#) this fiction as fact. Why? It felt right: liberals lost white men for fighting the good fight on civil rights. Therefore, Democrats could feel good about losing. Yet as I have [written](#), even in the South that explanation is simplistic. But the theory that Democrats problem with white men is merely a Southern phenomenon is more problematic.

Bartels uses 1952 as a starting point. That was the first year regional presidential election breakdowns were possible with polling. Yet in 1952 both parties attempted to convince Dwight Eisenhower to be their nominee. And for good reason, as the Republican nominee Ike won every state in the non-south. 1952 was an outlier. Bartels missed the real picture.

In general terms -- no pun intended in Ike's case -- white men were an unusually low share of the Democratic vote in 1952. That year, Republicans nominated a centrist who was the hero of the Second World War. The result was humiliating for liberals. The GOP trounced Democrats by a striking double-digit margin.

The 1960 race is a far more accurate starting point. It was a narrow contest and prior to the modern paradigm shift -- between 1964 and 1972 -- that defines presidential politics to this day. Between 1960 and 2004, Democrats lost 12 percent of the non-Southern white men and 17 percent of white men in the South. For once and for all: the Democratic decline was not merely due to the "Southern Flip." Conventional wisdom is easily born and dies hard in presidential politics.

The Other White Man

The Southern misconception is often used to prove this blowback thesis, epitomized in Matthews' question. That so many continue to explain white men's vote in terms of "resistance" to a woman or a black man -- especially in the framework of the Democratic race -- demonstrates how deep our biases run with the same group said to be most biased.

The *Journal* article also captured this impulse to assume the worst in white males. One theory floated: because white males are trending toward Obama it proves that they are more sexist than they are racist.

If that speculation holds, why were white men initially with Clinton? Prejudice is, after all, a vice of instinct.

Like all Democrats -- female, male, black, white, brown -- Democratic white men's first instinct was to be with the frontrunner. But unlike white women, as Obama became more widely known, white men had no stake in the symbolism of her candidacy. Therefore, they were more willing to swing to his electoral coffer.

Many of these men casting Democratic ballots today are of the 37 percent of white males who voted for John Kerry in 2004. Yet neither campaign understands exactly how to reach out to them. This is true in part because Democrats have largely ignored white men as a constituency.

But if broad swaths of the population like Hispanics or women are a constituency, surely white men are as well. And a look at the 2004 Election Day exit poll provides a telling lesson for Clinton and Obama.

Those white men who voted for George W. Bush in 2004 said the "issue that mattered most in deciding their vote" was terrorism (35 percent) or moral values (31 percent). Yet among the minority of white men who voted Democratic, only five percent said terrorism and 10 percent said moral values. In other words, Clinton's muddled stance on Iraq and hawkish stance on Iran was wrong for most Democratic white men.

For those Democratic white men, the foremost issue in 2004 was Iraq (26 percent) and economy/jobs (35 percent). Clinton's recent effort to mount a broad economic appeal may prove too late.

Clinton failed to consider white men in her strategy. She is reaping that whirlwind today. It is not, however, that Obama's campaign did study these men. His was a broad appeal, less obsessed with individual groups. He reflected the overall framework of the Democratic mind. Therefore he attracted white men sympathetic to that mind.

Consider when 2004 voters were asked what issue mattered most in deciding whom to support. White men who voted Republican said they supported the candidate who "has clear stands on the issues" (30 percent), is a "strong leader" (31 percent), or is "honest and trustworthy" (18 percent). This is why I emphasize in my book that "grit" is the value underlying all values politics. This is especially true for the white men who Democrats lost.

Meanwhile, of those white men who voted for John Kerry: five percent valued that their candidate was a "strong leader," 10 percent valued most that he had "clear stands on the issues," and nine percent said is "honest and trustworthy." White men, like white women, are not one monolith. Yet in the general election, the patterns shared by all those white men who left Democrats will have to be considered by the political left.

Those white males who supported Kerry most valued the personal qualities of a candidate who "will bring about needed change" (47 percent), is intelligent (17 percent), and "cares about people like me" (13 percent). That "change" ranked so high on the list explains Obama's appeal, at least in part.

Using education level in the Democratic field, as an indicator of class, also sheds more light on what's occurring today. Those white male Democrats without college educations were roughly three times more likely than those who graduated college to value that the candidate who "cares about people like me." In comparison, those who graduated college were roughly three times more likely than those who did not value that the candidate "is intelligent." White male Democrats who graduated college were also three times more likely to say the issue that mattered most was the war in Iraq, where Obama benefited from his early stance against the war. It is no surprise that they would be more sympathetic to Obama today.

Equally, that working class white male Democrats want to believe that the candidate "cares about people like me" certainly explains in part why Clinton has generally held on to their support.

It should also startle few that Obama's strategy to leave behind the cultural politics of the '60s and run a post-racial campaign -- when the burden of America's original sin of slavery and racism has fallen on white men today -- appeals to some independent white men. But in John McCain, any Democrat will find a daunting opponent with white men. He is the embodiment of much they admire.

What we can say, however, is that the 2006-midterm elections proved that white men are open to supporting Democrats, particularly moderates.

It will be this presidential election that tests whether Democrats can turn frustration with Republicans into a new majority. This is why the contest for white men is larger than the Democratic primary. It will not only likely decide the nominee. It may prove a harbinger for who becomes our next president.

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