

## GOP fears charges of racism, sexism

By: [David Paul Kuhn](#)

February 24, 2008 10:58 PM EST

Top Republican strategists are working on plans to protect the GOP from charges of racism or sexism in the general election, as they prepare for a presidential campaign against the first ever African-American or female Democratic nominee.

The Republican National Committee has commissioned polling and focus groups to determine the boundaries of attacking a minority or female candidate, according to people involved. The secretive effort underscores the enormous risk senior GOP operatives see for a party often criticized for its insensitivity to minorities in campaigns dating back to the 1960s.

The RNC project is viewed as so sensitive that those involved in the work were reluctant to discuss the findings in detail. But one Republican strategist, who asked that his name be withheld to speak candidly, said the research shows the daunting and delicate task ahead.

Republicans will be told to “be sensitive to tone and stick to the substance of the discussion” and that “the key is that you have to be sensitive to the fact that you are running against historic firsts,” the strategist explained.

### See Also:

- [Hillary: I don't 'look very wistful'](#)
- [Nader unloads on Obama, Clinton](#)
- [Ad shows Hillary's vulnerability dilemma](#)

In other words, Republicans should expect a severe backlash if they say or do anything that smacks of politicizing race or gender. They didn't need an expensive poll to learn that lesson, however.

They could simply have asked Joe Biden, John Edwards, Bill Clinton or any number of Democratic politicians who stung over their choice of words in this campaign already.

GOP officials are certain their words will be scrutinized ever more aggressively. They anticipate a regular media barrage of accusations of intolerance – or much worse.

They seem most concerned about Obama right now.

“You can't run against [Barack Obama](#) the way you could run against Bill Clinton, Al Gore or John Kerry,” said Jack Kemp, the 1996 GOP vice presidential nominee, who expressed concern that the party could be reduced to an “all white country club party” if it does not tread cautiously.

“Being an African American at the top of the ticket, if he makes it, is such a great statement about the country,” he added, “Obviously you have to be sensitive to issues that affect urban America. ...You have to be careful.”

GOP operatives have already coined a term for clumsy rhetoric: “undisciplined messaging.” It appears as a bullet point in a Power Point presentation making the rounds among major donors, party leaders and surrogates. The presentation outlines five main strategic attacks against an Obama candidacy, with one of them stating how “undisciplined messaging carries great risk.”

“Republicans will need to exercise less deafness and more deftness in dealing with a different looking candidate, whether it is a woman or a black man,” Republican strategist Kellyanne Conway said. “But at the same time, really charge back at any insinuation or accusation of sexism or racism.

“You can’t allow the party to be Macaca-ed,” she continued, referring to a much-publicized remark made by former GOP Sen. George Allen that played a significant role in his 2006 defeat. “I think the standards are higher and the bar is lower for the Republican Party.”

Republicans interviewed for this story uniformly believe they will have to be especially careful. Many expect to be held to a higher rhetorical standard than is customary in campaigns, in part because of perceptions of intolerance that still dog the party.

“Fair or unfair, but that’s going to be a reality,” said GOP strategist John Weaver, a longtime confidant of [John McCain](#). “The P.C. [politically correct] police will be out and the standards will be very narrow.”

The McCain camp is only beginning to explore this dilemma, aides said.

McCain’s strategic team still lacks survey research on either of their likely opponents in the general election, inhibiting their capacity “to discuss it intelligently,” a top adviser said. The campaign is currently occupied with “getting our act together structurally.”

“But my basic thought on it is that McCain is not much of a negative campaigner anyhow,” the advisor said. “When he does get into debates with people it’s on issues, substance. So I don’t think we are going to have to train our candidate not to insult people.”

The potential for mischief reaches well beyond any “undisciplined messaging” that the Republican nominee might engage in. In the case of the Clinton campaign, it has been the surrogates – like former President Clinton – who have been the source of much of the blowback for imprudent language.

“What I would not do is do what Bill Clinton has done,” said Ed Rollins, [Mike Huckabee’s](#) campaign chairman. “I would not in any way, shape, or form trivialize the strength of an Obama or compare him to another candidate.”

But some on the right are equally wary of unnecessary timidity. According to their thinking, the Democratic candidate begins as the frontrunner in the general election – and that will compel the Republican Party and its nominee to run a fiercely aggressive campaign.

“If we approach this campaign from the standpoint that we need to take political sensitivity training because one candidate is a woman or one candidate is black, I think we are approaching it from the wrong standpoint because that already handcuffs us,” said Republican strategist Tony Fabrizio. “If McCain is afraid, or shies away from taking on Obama because that’s what they worry about, then they’ve lost the battle to begin with.”

