

Was it race, or something else, that led to an Obama victory?

While supporters can scarcely contain their euphoria over Sen. Barack Obama's historic win of the U.S. presidency - the first for a black man - I am still stuck chewing on the fact that Obama was a major political party's nominee for president in the first place, let alone the victor in the 2008 epic race for the White House.

I am surprised to see it happen in my own lifetime. I can only imagine how Amanda Jones, the 109-year-old daughter of a man born into slavery, felt when she cast her vote for Obama in Bastrop County, Texas, in early voting in October.

One white woman, a die-hard Republican and huge George W. Bush supporter who voted for Obama in early voting in West Virginia, was quoted by someone close to her as saying, "After growing up in a seriously segregated society but being appalled by it, I wanted to take advantage of my first chance to vote for a black man for president."

Does an Obama win, which did not happen without major support from whites too, signal the beginning of a new and better era in race relations in the U.S.? Why does race matter so much when people have to decide whom to trust?

Anyone who thinks race is not a major factor in elections is naive.

But those who think that African-Americans, for example, voted for a black man solely because he looks like them miss the point too; their choice was more complicated than that.

Race matters because many racial groups in the U.S. share common experiences. As such, while you may not know another's personality and personal history, one look can speak volumes about what that person probably was - or wasn't - subjected to.

And it won't be the experiences of joy and contentment that will matter most; it will be the experiences of pain.

People want pain to stop at all cost, especially the pain that causes premature death and disability, diminishes the quality of life and creates hopelessness.

In the U.S., countless people across all racial lines are hurting - losing their sons and daughters in a war declared because of erroneous reports that Iraq was harboring weapons of mass destruction, or facing massive home foreclosures and reduced retirement funds and medical benefits.

Even three years after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the snub of a president who continued his vacation three days into New Orleans' death throes still cuts deep for countless Americans.

Before pain can be stopped, however, it first has to be acknowledged. And if it is experienced by one who has power over it, the odds are even greater that it will be dealt with swiftly.

So the Obama victory isn't just about a black man excelling in an arena dominated for centuries by whites; it is about a candidate who spoke directly to people along their racial lines and convinced them that he understood - even felt - their pain, and would do what was within his power to promote healing.

Several groups that support Obama wanted to be described along racial lines too, and in categories that speak of their issues. On Obama's official Web site they call themselves First Americans for Obama (Native Americans), Jewish Americans for Obama, European and Mediterranean Americans for Obama, African-Americans for Obama, Arab-Americans for Obama, Latinos ... Asian & Pacific Islanders ... Americans Abroad ... Americans With Disabilities ... Kids - even Republicans and Sportsmen - for Obama!

I think the Obama campaign was smart to speak directly to people about what was obvious - who they are, where they hurt and what he wants to do to help.

And, in return, they conferred on him what is still the highest office in the world: the presidency of the United States.

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