

## Barack Obama is the Superior Choice for African-American Voters

*Theodore Cross*

**F**OR THE FIRST TIME in the history of our country, a black man has a credible chance of becoming president of the United States. After the long nightmare years of slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow, and enduring race discrimination, one would expect that, in the upcoming presidential primary contest, Illinois Senator Barack Obama would be the overwhelming choice of black American voters.

Not so! National polls show that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are drawing about equal shares of the black vote.

The standard explanation is that Hillary Clinton is the inherited winner of solid numbers of black voters because of the tremendous popularity of her husband among African Americans. We all remember how President Bill Clinton campaigned in black neighborhoods and churches, showed compassion and deep concerns for poor blacks, and sought out the opinions, advice, and even the forgiveness of black leaders. His remarkable ability to relate to African Americans, a quality missing among almost all white politicians, earned President Clinton both loyalty and affection among many millions of African Americans. In fact, he was so admired in the African-American community that in 1998 Princeton professor and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison called him “our first black president.”

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But Bill Clinton's success in winning the affection of African Americans is only part of the story. Senator Hillary Clinton in her own right has turned out to be an appealing candidate for black voters. In her so-called Team Hillary, she has assembled highly effective organizations of dedicated supporters in black communities throughout the nation. Her campaign's legal counsel is the widely admired African-American lawyer Cheryl Mills, the former White House deputy counsel who defended Bill Clinton in his impeachment trial in the U.S. Senate. In key states where the black vote is large, and possibly critical in primary outcomes, she has recruited skilled and experienced African-American advisory groups. At the grass roots, Team Hillary has placed scores of faithful bands of African-American campaign workers scattered about in key parts of the country.

Senator Clinton has won a number of flat-out endorsements from influential African Americans. Her supporters include Philadelphia Mayor John Street, former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, author and poet Maya Angelou, composer and recording mogul Quincy Jones, and Robert L. Johnson, founder of the influential Black Entertainment Television network. Already she has the important backing of at least seven members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

In the style of President Bill Clinton before her, she makes regular appearances at black churches where she pays homage to black civil rights pioneers. She artfully uses Bible references and religious imagery to endear herself to black congregations. Last spring Hillary Clinton won glowing praise from the black press when she joined dozens of America's most famous black leaders in singing "We Shall Overcome" at the sacred shrine of black America, the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Successfully sidestepping charges of pandering to black voters, she deftly shifts to a southern drawl as she sings the popular black hymn:

"I don't feel no ways tired. We got to stay awake. We have a march to finish."

In her campaign to lock up black support, there are no qualms about playing the race card. Senator Clinton scored with black voters when she declared in a June debate at Howard University that the country would be more worried about HIV/AIDS if the disease were disproportionately affecting whites instead of blacks. The powerful political impact of her statement was not diminished by the circumstance that her facts were incorrect. The annual federal budget for HIV research is \$3 billion. This is more than the nation's entire appropriation for research on either heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, or breast cancer. But Clinton's assertion that racism drives white-controlled government decisions on the allocations of disease research stoked anti-white anger and won her acclaim among black voters.

Probably no one at the Howard University event, black or white, was aware of the fact that in August 2006 Hillary Clinton was the only one of 20 senators of the Republican-controlled Senate Health, Education, and Labor Committee to vote to gut a plan that would have redirected more AIDS funds to heavily black communities in the South. Her vote prompted the National Black Chamber of Commerce to publish full-page newspaper advertisements denouncing Clinton as being "two-faced" on the issue.

In fact, as I write today, there seems to be a prospect of almost inevitability of her winning the Democratic presidential nomination. It may be that to date upwards of 7 million black voters have been drawn into the Hillary Clinton camp. And this has occurred despite the fact, as I shall show, that the announced political programs of the two leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination would call for an entirely different result.

Let's now compare the platforms of Senators Clinton and Obama on a political and social issue of commanding importance to most black voters. This is the huge and persisting racial gap in the United States in unemployment, poverty, healthcare, and education. To be sure, black voters in the United States no

longer automatically vote skin color in any particular election contest. Nor do they always ask which candidate is best for black people. Yet among the majority of African Americans, the issue of race and racial inequality persists as a concern of paramount importance. The famed commentator on presidential elections, Theodore White, once said there are three great and enduring issues in the United States. They are “war and peace,” “bread and butter,” and “black and white.” In black America today, as always, “bread and butter” and “black and white” rise to the very top where they sometimes challenge even the issue of “war and peace.”

**A Summary of the Standard Measures of  
Black Inequality in the United States**

	<u><b>Black</b></u>	<u><b>White</b></u>
Unemployment Rate (June 2007)	9.0%	4.2%
Teenage Unemployment (June 2007)	37.3%	16.6%
Median Family Income (2005)	\$35,464	\$63,156
Poverty Rate for All Persons (2005)	24.9%	8.3%
Child Poverty Rate (2005)	34.5%	10.0%
Mean Family Net Worth	\$5,598	\$88,651
College Graduation Rate	41%	61%
Life Expectancy	73.3 years	78.3 years
Percent College Graduates (All Adults 2005)	18.5%	31.0%
Percent High School Grads (All Adults 2005)	85.6%	93.4%
Infant Mortality Rate for every 1,000 live births	13.6	5.7
Male Prison Inmates per 100,000 population	3,145	471
Families Who Own Their Home	48.2%	75.8%

*Source: Journal of Blacks in Higher Education.*

What do the campaign platforms of the two main contenders have to offer on the subject of racial inequality? Senator Clinton’s presidential campaign Web site lists 10 issues that lead her agenda in a Clinton presidency. At the very top of her list is

“Strengthen the Middle Class.” There then follow nine other Clinton concerns. They are providing affordable healthcare, ending the war in Iraq, energy independence, fulfilling our promise to veterans, supporting parents and children, restoring America’s standing in the world, being a champion for women, comprehensive government reform, and strengthening our democracy.

These admirable goals, aimed as they are at the white American heartland, offer little specific appeal to the aspirations of most African-American voters who, in their choice of a presidential candidate, hope for a strong and explicit executive program to defend and advance the life chances of African Americans. Ever since the 1960s when blacks won the legally protected right to vote, they have always counted on a Democratic platform that addressed some of their most serious problems. But Hillary Clinton’s platform offers nothing.

It is true that Senator Clinton’s campaign speeches include expressions of support for the plight of poor blacks. But it is her formal political platform that tells the story. The words “black” or “minority” never enter the text of her official program for America. Given Hillary Clinton’s well-known progressive views on social and racial issues, one would have expected to find key words in her platform such as “inner-city schools,” “reduction of poverty,” “revitalizing America’s cities,” “increased access to job training,” and “support of Head Start programs for youngsters from low-income families.” One would have expected too that Senator Clinton’s platform would address such issues as community development programs for inner cities, increased support for minority college students, support for black farmers, programs to create capital and encourage entrepreneurship in black communities, and tougher penalties for hate crimes. Yet all of the standard campaign promises that a liberal Democrat typically offers to blacks are completely absent from her announced program.

The explanation is clear. Senator Clinton, as was the case with her husband before her, is furiously moving toward the political

center and redefining herself as a moderate. In her announced program there is not even a dollop of written concern for guarding or advancing the aspirations of blacks and other minorities. The reason is that many of her most important voting constituencies are unfriendly to efforts to help blacks. Many of the groups on whom she depends for a successful run for the presidency tend to be conservative on racial issues. They include white ethnics, farmers, union leaders, small business owners, blue-collar workers, conservative Democrats, white parents of public school children, and that very large group of voters called Reagan Democrats. Jewish interests that have suffered in the past from the burden of restrictive racial quotas are especially hostile to most government programs targeted to assist blacks.

It's safe to say, too, that many white Americans, who are at the core of the Clinton pool of voters, believe that many of the problems of blacks are self-inflicted. They tend to the view that government programs to help blacks are ineffective and a waste of money. Many among Clinton's likely supporters consider that antipoverty programs, even when cast as racially neutral, are really black programs in disguise. True, it is acceptable to Clinton voters for the senator publicly to empathize with the severe problems of black America. But any explicit program that spends public money to help blacks always has the potential to severely damage her chances for the Democratic nomination for the presidency. In short, the leaders of the Clinton campaign appear to believe that if she announces any form of a black program, she kills the support of voters she needs.

Now let's turn to the platform of Senator Obama. His campaign Web site, published on the Internet for all to see, bears down hard on all of the major issues of concern to blacks. These include fighting poverty, improving our schools, voting rights and election reform. Unlike Clinton, he outlines a comprehensive program to reduce poverty, revitalize America's urban areas, and empower black Americans.

Here in more detail are the Obama proposals as outlined in his campaign position paper:

- Increased funding for the Community Development Block Grant program which provides housing, job training, and other services to impoverished urban areas.
- A \$1 billion, five-year expansion in job and career training programs for low-income Americans.
  - The creation of a series of “Promise Neighborhoods” across America patterned after the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City. Low-income families in these promise neighborhoods will be offered parent counseling, childcare, job training, healthcare, financial advice, afterschool programs, technology training and other services to help them escape the cycle of poverty.
- An expansion of the Head Start program for preschool children in high-poverty areas.
- An increase in the maximum Pell Grant award for low-income college students.
- Expansion of the Nurse-Family Partnership where nurses visit low-income expectant mothers at home to ensure that they receive proper prenatal care.
  - An increase in the earned income tax credit which will allow low-income working families to keep more of the money they earn.
- A proposal to increase funding for the Jobs Access and Reverse Commute program so that low-income workers can get to their jobs at a reduced cost and the children of these workers can receive free public transportation to childcare facilities.
- The establishment of an affordable housing trust fund that will produce 14,000 new units of affordable housing for low-income families each year.
- Increased access to capital for blacks and other minorities through Small Business Administration programs.
- Job training, substance abuse and mental health counseling, and employment opportunities for people who have been incarcerated. Since blacks are five times as likely as whites to have been in prison, these programs will disproportionately benefit African Americans.
  - To further raise the minimum wage rate and the child tax credit.

Obama has put a lot on the table, maybe too much. Nevertheless, announced here on the Obama Web site is an

elaborate and unqualified proposal to use presidential power to deal with some of the most severe problems of African Americans and other minorities. There are no politically expedient bows to the hardships of America's white middle class. In his declaration of a concrete program for blacks and others who have had a difficult time, there is no doublespeak or ambiguous language. Senator Obama deals with racial issues head on. He enters the arena of race with his six-shooters blazing.

Senator Clinton, on the other hand, ducks, straddles, changes the subject, or remains silent. Her evasive strategy on issues of race was revealed in an early August appearance at a convention of African-American journalists. Hillary Clinton was asked whether she was "black enough" to hold the allegiance of African-American voters. Sidestepping the question, Clinton replied that she was proud of her party for having a black, a woman, and a Latino competing for its nomination.

The case I make for Obama rests primarily on the strength of his campaign proposals for black America. His platform becomes compelling when contrasted with the Clinton program that offers nothing. But there is another important reason why Obama should be the choice of African-American voters.

Think back to the great role models of the African-American past, such giants as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Thurgood Marshall, and A. Philip Randolph. In fields unrelated to civil rights, one thinks of iconic figures such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, E. Franklin Frazier, Percy Julian, and Carter Woodson. In recent years there have been unprecedented breakthroughs. A black man and a black woman have been named United States secretaries of state. Another black woman has been chosen president of a great Ivy League university. Today, a dozen or more African-American men and women hold the highest executive positions in America's largest and most powerful corporations and financial institutions. Only a generation ago, their fathers, who were often college graduates, had to settle for jobs as postal workers or low-level civil servants.

Now in the upcoming election, there is a possibility of the arrival of an African-American role model whose influence and stature could far exceed that of any black person in the past. There is a chance today, a possibility never remotely considered since the founding of this country, that a black man, in a multi-racial society where blacks are a minority, may be elected to the most important and powerful position in the world. When one contemplates this thrilling prospect — however distant it still may seem — one looks forward to a massive surge of black support for Barack Obama.

### **A Note on the Prospect of an Obama Nomination in the Democratic Primaries**

Now let's suppose that after consideration of all the issues facing the nation, both foreign and domestic, as well as the general abilities of the candidates, Barack Obama becomes the choice of a far greater percentage of black voters. It remains true that very many African Americans will still deny him their votes unless they believe that he stands a reasonable chance of winning the nomination.

If we examine the situation state by state, this is not a campaign of David vs. Goliath. In many state contests black voters have the voting strength sufficient to deliver a margin of victory to Obama. Blacks traditionally make up about one quarter of all voters in Democratic primary elections nationwide. But in some key states such as South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, blacks can be a majority of all voters in the Democratic primary election. The reason is that in these states huge numbers of whites vote in the Republican primary. In these southern states this greatly enhances the power of the black vote in the Democratic primary. If blacks turn out in large numbers and produce a solid vote for Obama, the Illinois senator could easily win a plurality in very many, if not most, of the southern states with significant black electorates.

Elsewhere, the new schedule of Democratic presidential primary elections works in Obama's favor. The primary schedules

are continually changing as states jockey their primary dates in order to strengthen their influence on the elective process. Yet one can make some estimates. As I write in late August, the first major test is Iowa, now scheduled for January 14. In Iowa a recent poll shows Obama running one percent ahead of Clinton. This is a remarkable achievement in a state that is 94 percent white. An Obama victory in Iowa would be a severe, if not fatal, blow to the candidacy of John Edwards. Also, it would do significant damage to Clinton's momentum toward winning the nomination. Whatever the outcome, a strong, early-on showing for Obama in predominantly white Iowa would be an exciting demonstration of his appeal to white voters.

A win, or even a strong third-place showing in Iowa, would boost Obama's chances in New Hampshire a week later. Clinton currently leads polls in New Hampshire. Her campaign in New Hampshire began early. She holds a huge majority among women voters in the state. But voters in the New Hampshire primary are known to buck pollsters' predictions and they often change their allegiances in the last week of the campaign. The impressive Deval Patrick victory in the 2006 gubernatorial election in Massachusetts shows that white voters in New England are willing to support a black man for high executive office.

Putting aside the results in predominantly white Iowa and New Hampshire, Obama will be a formidable candidate in the races that follow. The Florida and South Carolina primaries are now scheduled just one week after the first primary in New Hampshire. In all probability, at this early stage there still will be a large slate of white Democratic candidates. Blacks will make up 25 percent of the Democratic primary voters in Florida and, if past voting patterns prevail, a majority of the Democratic primary voters in South Carolina. With the hope that the white vote is split among several candidates, a large black vote for Obama would almost certainly give him a plurality in these states. This outcome would build huge momentum for Barack Obama in the important primaries that come next.

Following these two key early primaries are the Super Tuesday primary elections in a large number of states now set for February 5. Among the states currently scheduled to hold primaries on February 5 are Alabama, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Missouri, New York, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Georgia. All these states have significant black voting blocs. As stated, Georgia and Alabama blacks may be a majority of all voters in the Democratic primary. In Delaware, Arkansas, New Jersey, and New York, blacks will be at least one quarter of all Democratic primary voters. With the momentum from plurality victories in South Carolina and Florida, Obama would stand an excellent chance of winning a plurality in a number of the Super Tuesday states if black voters deliver 75 percent or more of their votes to the Illinois senator. Obama also will win a share of white votes in these states. On Super Tuesday Obama might be able to deal a knockout blow to the presidential ambitions of Hillary Clinton.

Many political observers believe that after the dust settles on Super Tuesday it will be clear who the Democratic nominee will be. But if the nomination is still in doubt, Obama would be in a good position the next week to win in Virginia and Maryland, two states with large percentages of black primary voters. These are the only two states now scheduled to hold primaries in the week following Super Tuesday. The District of Columbia is also scheduled to hold its primary on February 12. Obama would be well positioned to win all of these three primaries. Lawmakers in Pennsylvania are also contemplating moving their primary to February 12. Here too blacks make up as much as one quarter of the Democratic primary electorate.

If the nomination still has not been secured, primaries in Ohio, Texas, Illinois, and North Carolina, now scheduled for March but subject to change, could provide another chance for Obama to lock up the nomination. There are large numbers of black voters in these states. Again a heavy black vote for Obama is critical.

Polls show that the electability of Hillary Clinton in the general election is in serious doubt. A recent Zogby poll found that 46 percent of Americans said they would “never vote for her.” Her national likability rating is about 30 percent, the lowest of the major candidates. Even 42 percent of people who self-identified themselves as moderates in the Zogby poll of voters nationwide said they would never vote for Clinton. Her greatest vulnerability remains that she voted for the Iraq war when, of course, Obama opposed it.

Barack Obama offers a fresh and positive message. Whenever he speaks he reveals a powerful intellect and competence. He has a charming quality of homemade likability. Yet voters also see a strong demeanor of gravity and integrity. Obama shows none of the qualities of opportunism, shrillness, and unbridled ambition that so many voters dislike in Hillary Clinton. He far outshines any of the potential GOP contenders.

Obama offers a concrete program for black America. Hillary Clinton offers none.

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