

# Identity politics: Sex, race color perceptions of Obama, Palin

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Even among young voters receptive to Barack Obama and Sarah Palin's historic candidacies, race and gender may hurt—and help—their reputations, according to new University of Michigan research.

U-M psychology researchers Cathleen Clerkin and Fiona Lee found college students, like other voters, have inherent beliefs about the compatibility between social identities and political leadership, which in turn, color their perceptions of political candidates.

"When evaluating the issues that candidates would be most and least effective, voters seemed to rely on the candidates' biology more than party or ideology," Clerkin said. "We found that voters have inherent beliefs about whether being a minority—a woman or an African American—is compatible with being a political leader."

For example, Obama, the first African American Democratic presidential nominee in the United States, was considered more effective on race-related issues but rated as less effective on national defense, economic policy, foreign affairs and a whole host of other political issues unrelated to race.

Similarly, a July ABC-Washington Post poll found voters evenly divided on the question of whether Obama would make a good commander-in-chief, while 72 percent said McCain would be a good commander-in-chief. The latest ABC-Washington Post poll, released Oct. 13, gave

Obama a 10-point lead but at the same time, McCain was favored on the issue of handling the war on terrorism, 49 percent to 43 percent.

However, when voters believed that being a minority is compatible with being a political leader, perceived effectiveness on minority issues did not detract from perceived effectiveness on other issues.

"With so many 'firsts' in this year's primary and presidential races, we wondered how these identities play into voters' perceptions of these candidates," Clerkin said. "We found very compelling data that voters' ratings of political candidates' effectiveness on a variety of issues—ranging from national defense to foreign policy to social welfare—are strongly influenced by the candidates' race and gender."

Lee, a psychology and business professor and an expert on organizational behavior, and Clerkin, a doctoral candidate in psychology, asked 182 U-M students to comment on a hypothetical presidential race between Obama, Palin, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden.

The students were a diverse group but far more liberal than the nation as a whole: 36 percent identified themselves as liberals, 27.5 percent said they were moderately liberal, 28 percent said they were moderately conservative and just 8.5 percent identified themselves as conservative. Forty-five percent were Democrats, 25 percent were Republicans and 30 percent were independents.

Clerkin said the study found a large discrepancy between effectiveness on general issues and identity issues—especially for female politicians.

"This suggests that voters think that politicians with nontraditional identities will only be effective 'within their realm,'" she said. "This could turn into gender or racial discrimination among voters when it comes time to go to the voting booths."

"Besides the fact that they obviously have important implications for the current and future elections, these findings are also striking because previous psychological research does not suggest that minorities and women with 'conflicting' identities will be more effective in their realm. So these beliefs may be unfairly handicapping minority and female politicians."

A little over a third of study participants believed that leaders would feel conflict, and party affiliation didn't seem to matter. This difference in belief (conflict versus compatibility) drives voters' perceptions of effectiveness, the research found.

Participants were asked to rate each candidate on his or her effectiveness in dealing with multiple issues. Some of these issues were related to race (such as affirmative action), some were related to gender (such as equal pay for men and women) and some were issues that have general relevance (such as national defense or economic policy).

"We found that the distinctive, minority identities of the candidates predicted voters' evaluations about what types of issues on which they would excel and what types of issues with which they would struggle," Lee said.

Of all the political issues, Clinton and Palin were viewed as most effective on gender issues, while Obama was rated most effective on race issues. Biden was viewed as least effective on both gender and race issues.

Voters' evaluations and ratings of political candidates are influenced by what the candidates look like rather than what the candidates say, Lee said. Regardless of what political strategists and commentators might say about "playing the race card," minority political candidates are primarily defined by their distinctive gender or racial identities, she added.

Gender-related issues where women candidates were found to have an advantage included: equal pay regardless of gender, sexual harassment at work, women's rights, child care and domestic violence.

Race-related issues where Obama was found to have an advantage included: the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa, immigration issues, affirmative action, welfare reform and racial segregation issues. General issues where neither gender nor race offered an advantage to a candidate included environmental issues, taxes, Iraq, health care and homeland security.

Provided by University of Michigan

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