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So Far, Obama Can't Take Black Vote for Granted

By [RACHEL L. SWARNS](#)

WASHINGTON, Feb. 1 — He is hailed by his supporters as the hope of an increasingly multicultural nation, a political phenomenon who can wow white voters while carrying the aspirations of African-Americans all the way to the White House.

So why are some black voters so uneasy about [Senator Barack Obama](#)?

The black author and essayist Debra J. Dickerson recently declared that “Obama isn’t black” in an American racial context. Some polls suggest that Mr. Obama trails one of his rivals for the [Democratic nomination](#), Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), in the battle for African-American support.

And at the Shepherd Park Barber Shop here, where the hair clippers hummed and the television blared, Calvin Lanier summed up the simmering ambivalence. Mr. Lanier pointed to Mr. Obama’s heritage — he is the American-born son of a black father from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas — and the fact that he did not embody the experiences of most African-Americans whose ancestors endured slavery, segregation and the bitter struggle for civil rights.

“When you think of a president, you think of an American,” said Mr. Lanier, a 58-year-old barber who is still considering whether to support Mr. Obama. “We’ve been taught that a president should come from right here, born, raised, bred, fed in America. To go outside and bring somebody in from another nationality, now that doesn’t feel right to some people.”

On Wednesday, the question of race took center stage in the presidential campaign because of remarks that Senator [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), Democrat of Delaware, made about Mr. Obama. Mr. Biden characterized Mr. Obama as “the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy” and then spent the day — his first as an official presidential candidate, explaining and apologizing for his remarks.

But among many blacks, the awkward and painful debate about race, immigrant heritage and the presidency has been bubbling for months.

Mr. Obama certainly has prominent black supporters and many shake their heads with exasperation at such talk about a man they see as the first African-American with a real shot at the presidency.

His supporters say his background only enhances his appeal as someone who has addressed the concerns of black Americans as a community organizer in Chicago, a state legislator in Illinois and a senator in Washington.

“He has a track record for being concerned about people who are poor, and it seems to be genuine,” said Carol M. Swain, a black professor of political science at [Vanderbilt University](#) who has written about black politics.

“Not only do I think that black Americans will embrace Barack Obama, but I think they will do it with enthusiasm.”

Indeed, many pollsters and analysts believe Mr. Obama's life story of growing up in Hawaii and Indonesia with his mother and his maternal grandparents and of his struggle to define his own racial identity will resonate with voters across ethnic and color lines.

But while many whites embrace Mr. Obama's melting pot background, it remains profoundly unsettling for some blacks who argue that he is distant from the struggles and cultural identities of most black Americans. The black columnist Stanley Crouch has said, “When black Americans refer to Obama as ‘one of us,’ I do not know what they are talking about.”

Ms. Dickerson echoed that sentiment.

“I've got nothing but love for the brother, but we don't have anything in common,” said Ms. Dickerson, who wrote recently about Mr. Obama in Salon, the online magazine. “His father was African. His mother was a white woman. He grew up with white grandparents.

“Now, I'm willing to adopt him,” Ms. Dickerson continued. “He married black. He acts black. But there's a lot of distance between black Africans and African-Americans.”

Mr. Obama's strategists are keenly aware of the gap and are trying to address it. On [Martin Luther King's Birthday](#), he spoke at a scholarship breakfast alongside the Rev. [Jesse Jackson](#). Mr. Jackson introduced him by saying, a “new president is in the house.”

Mr. Obama and his wife, Michelle, who is an African-American, were also on the February cover of Ebony.

Mr. Jackson and the Rev. [Al Sharpton](#), both former black presidential candidates, have declined to formally endorse Mr. Obama so far.

But Julian Bond, the chairman of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#), has described him as “tremendously appealing.” Several black Democrats in Congress, including Representatives [John Lewis](#), the civil rights pioneer from Georgia; Jesse L. Jackson Jr. of Illinois, the son of Jesse Jackson, and Artur Davis of Alabama, have supported his presidential bid.

His supporters, who note that he carried the black vote in his Senate race, say they are unperturbed by a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll that found that 20 percent of black voters surveyed supported Mr. Obama while 60 percent supported Mrs. Clinton. The survey had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus nine percentage points.

Emil Jones Jr., the president of the Illinois state senate and one of Mr. Obama's early mentors, says he is frustrated by black voters who question Mr. Obama's Kenyan heritage. As a state legislator, Mr. Obama had the support of voters in his district, which is 67 percent black.

“He doesn't share the same kind of background as most African-Americans, but he's addressed those issues that related to underprivileged communities throughout Illinois,” said Mr. Jones, who is black.

Mr. Obama describes himself as an African-American, and as a young man, he has said, he yearned to be

accepted by black Americans.

Mr. Obama declined to be interviewed, but in his memoir, published in 1995, he acknowledged being dogged by “the constant, crippling fear that I didn’t belong somehow, that unless I dodged and hid and pretended to be something I wasn’t, I would forever remain an outsider, with the rest of the world, black and white, always standing in judgment.”

Still, Mr. Biden’s remarks this week only heightened concerns among some blacks who believe that Mr. Obama, as the son of a black Kenyan, is more politically palatable to white voters because he is viewed as less confrontational and less focused on redress for past racial injustices than many black Americans descended from slaves. In that context, he resembles the last black man deemed to be a powerful presidential contender, [Colin L. Powell](#), who flirted with a White House bid in 1995.

Discussing his appeal to white voters at the time, Mr. Powell, the light-skinned son of Jamaican parents, noted that he spoke English well and was not confrontational. He concluded by saying, “I ain’t that black.”

Philip Kasinitz, a sociologist at the City University Graduate Center, said such a description might as easily apply to Mr. Obama. “He’s identifiably black, but in many ways he’s outside of normal race relations,” said Mr. Kasinitz, who has studied black immigrants in New York City politics. “He’s a black politician for whom whites don’t have to feel guilty.”

Ronald Walters, who advised Mr. Jackson’s presidential campaigns, said Mr. Obama’s campaign “evokes something which is very much in vogue, this notion of diversity that is not rooted in a compensatory concept.”

“He’s going to have to win over some African-Americans,” said Mr. Walters, who is black and heads the African-American Leadership Institute at the [University of Maryland](#). “They have a right to be somewhat suspicious of people who come into the country and don’t share their experience.”

In the 1990s, the number of blacks with recent roots in sub-Saharan Africa nearly tripled while the number of blacks with origins in the Caribbean grew by more than 60 percent, according to the [State University of New York at Albany](#). By 2000, foreign-born blacks constituted 30 percent of the blacks in New York City and 28 percent of the blacks in Boston, according to demographers at [Queens College](#).

Several leaders of the civil rights era had immigrant roots, including Stokely Carmichael, who was born in Trinidad; and Shirley Chisholm, the former presidential candidate and the first black woman to be elected to Congress. Her father was born in Guyana and her mother in Barbados.

Donna Brazile, who ran [Al Gore](#)’s presidential campaign, said she believed that Mr. Obama could woo black voters.

“Barack will tell us that we don’t have to go back to being just a white America or a black America, that we can now become something else, together,” said Ms. Brazile, who is unaffiliated with any presidential candidate.

“That’s the promise of his campaign,” she said, “and his challenge.”

Sabrina Pacifici contributed research for this article.