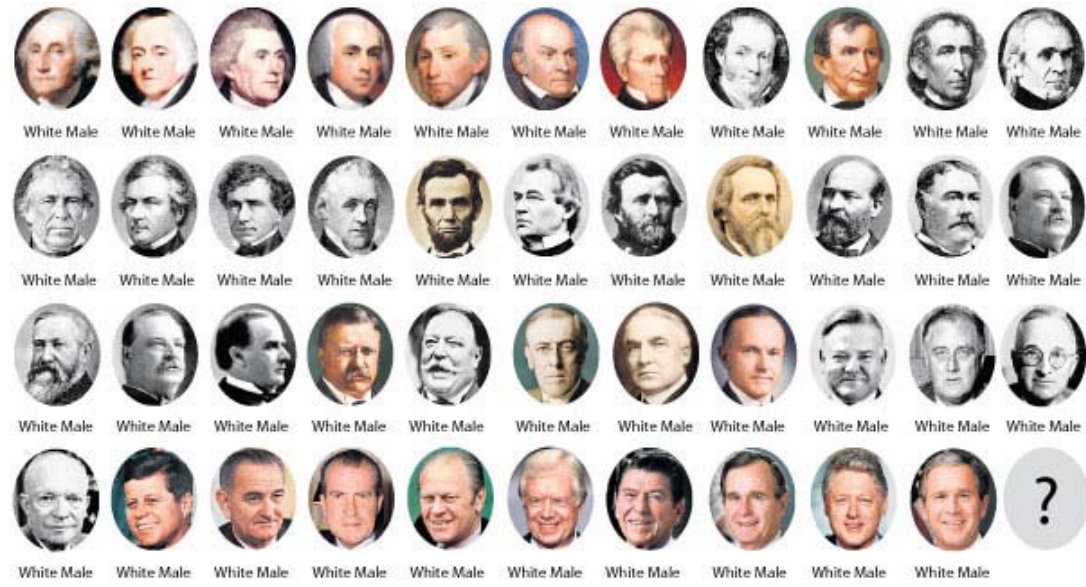


FIRSTS

The Pattern May Change, if ...



By ADAM NAGOURNEY
Published: December 10, 2006

AFTER a 217-year march of major presidential nominees who were, without exception, white and male, the 2008 campaign may offer voters a novel choice.

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Is America ready to elect a woman or an African-American as president?



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But as [Barack Obama](#), the senator from Illinois whose father is from Kenya, spends this weekend exploring a presidential bid in New Hampshire, and [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), the first woman to represent New York in the Senate, calls potential supporters in Iowa, the question remains: are Americans prepared to elect an African-American or a woman as president?

Or, to look at it from the view of [Democrats](#) hungry for victory in 2008, is the nation more likely to vote for a woman or an African-American for president?

Without question, women and blacks have made significant progress in winning office. The new Congress will include 71 women — one of whom will be the first female speaker of the House — compared with 25 when Representative [Geraldine Ferraro](#), a Queens Democrat, became the first woman to run as a major-party vice presidential candidate in 1984. There will be 43 blacks in the new Congress, compared with 13 when the [Congressional Black Caucus](#) was formed in 1969. A Gallup Poll in September showed a steady rise in the number of people who expect the nation to elect a woman or an African-American as president one

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Left, Bebetto Matthews/Associated Press; right, Jessica Rinaldi/Reuters

POSSIBILITIES Some political analysts say they think the country may accept a woman as president. But they are less sure about an African-American, even one as popular as Barack Obama.

day: Americans, it seems, are much more open to these choices than, say, someone who is an atheist or who is gay.

Times are indeed changing. But how much?

Over the past of the past eight years, in the view of analysts from both parties, the country has shifted markedly on the issue of gender, to the point where they say voters could very well be open to electing a woman in 2008. That is reflected, they say, in polling data and in the continued success of women running for office, in red and blue states alike. “The country is ready,” said Senator [Elizabeth Dole](#),

the North Carolina Republican, who ran unsuccessfully for president in 2000. “I’m not saying it’s going to happen in ’08. But the country is ready.”

By contrast, for all the excitement stirred by Mr. Obama, it is much less certain that an African-American could win a presidential election. Not as many blacks have been elected to prominent positions as women. Some high-profile black candidates — Harold Ford Jr., a Democrat running for the Senate in Tennessee, and Michael Steele, [a Republican](#) Senate candidate in Maryland — lost in November. And demographics might be an obstacle as well: black Americans are concentrated in about 25 states — typically blue ones, like New York and California. While black candidates cannot assume automatic support from black voters, they would at least provide a base. In states without big black populations, the candidate’s crossover appeal must be huge.

“All evidence is that a white female has an advantage over a black male — for reasons of our cultural heritage,” said the Rev. [Jesse L. Jackson](#), the civil rights leader who ran for president in 1984 and 1988. Still, he said, for African-American and female candidates, “It’s easier — emphatically so.”

Ms. Ferraro offered a similar sentiment. “I think it’s more realistic for a woman than it is for an African-American,” said Ms. Ferraro. “There is a certain amount of racism that exists in the United States — whether it’s conscious or not it’s true.”

“Women are 51 percent of the population,” she added.

Many analysts suggested that changing voter attitudes can best be measured in choices for governors, since they, like presidents, are judged as chief executives, rather than legislators. There will be one black governor next year — Deval L. Patrick in Massachusetts, the second in the nation since Reconstruction.

By contrast, women will be governors of nine states, including Washington, Arizona and Michigan, all potential battleground states in 2008, a fact that is no doubt viewed favorably by advisers to Mrs. Clinton.

“Voters are getting more comfortable with seeing governors as C.E.O.’s of states,” said Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, a Kansas Democrat. Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm, a Michigan Democrat who won a second term last month, said in an interview that when she first ran, she had to work harder. “Not this time,” she said in an interview. “They are used to a woman being governor.”