Dec-2008

Cultural Commentary: Race and The Race

William C. Levin
Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol27/iss2/11

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Supporters of Barack Obama’s run for the Presidency of the United States seem to have set new records for anxiety in the last days before the election. In our house, it was a twenty-Tums week. Despite poll results that consistently predicted Obama would win the popular vote by three to five percentage points, and the Electoral College race by a large margin, fans of his candidacy seemed certain that something awful would happen. He was bound to lose. For a long while the likely scenario for the fall was of the revelation of an Obama skeleton so grotesque as to sink his chances entirely. Forget about those silly little dirt bombs like the rumors that he was a Muslim, Arab, a friend to radicals of various sorts, or that he was hard-heartedly unconcerned about the fate of his poor Auntie Welfare. No, this was to be a really nasty one that would blow the whole thing apart. Bigamy, perhaps, with pictures for proof? None of these fears proved real, of course. By far the most common source of anxiety for the nail-biters was the certainty that the polls were wrong. Apparently, the fear was that a percentage of white respondents to pollsters were saying publicly that they were undecided or were planning on voting for Obama, but once in the voting booth they would vote for McCain. The polling experts told us that this had happened before, and has come to be termed the “Bradley effect.” In 1982 Tom Bradley, the African-American, Democratic Mayor of Los Angeles, lost his race for the Governorship of California to George Deukmejian, a white Republican. Polls predicted that Bradley would win comfortably, but he narrowly lost. It was suggested in some post-election studies that white voters had voted for Bradley at a lower rate than they had indicated in polls, and that a statistically unlikely percent of those who had said they were undecided, ultimately voted for Deukmejian.

Feeding the fears of a Bradley effect in the Obama-McCain race was the list of other contests between black and white candidates in which vote tallies were consistently lower for black candidates than polls had predicted. Among the black candidates who appear to have experienced this phenomenon were Harold Washington in his 1983 bid to be Mayor of Chicago, Jesse Jackson in the 1988 Democratic presidential primary, David Dinkins’ race for Mayor of New York in 1989, Douglas Wilder in the 1989 race for Governor of Virginia, and Carol Mosely Braun in her 1992 Senate race in Illinois.

When Obama won the election, it seemed that the fears of his supporters had been unfounded. Polls just before the election had predicted that he would win by 7.5% in the national popular vote. He won by about 1% less than that, well within the small (2%) margin of error that even polls using massive samples must accept. Perhaps white Americans who told pollsters that they planned to vote for Obama actually did.

But why should Obama supporters waste a perfectly good fear of disaster on rational interpretations of the outcome? A closer, and more tortured, view of vote patterns allows us to have our victory and fear it too. Perhaps there was a real Bradley effect, but Obama won anyway.

We sociologists are all too familiar with the forces that underlie the Bradley effect. It’s called “social desirability effect,” the tendency of a survey respondent to tell the interviewer what he or she thinks is socially acceptable rather than the truth. We have lots of evidence that this happens in all sorts of surveys, including political polls. For example, Americans routinely exaggerate how often they attend church and minimize how much alcohol they drink in order to reflect what they think are American standards of behavior. In studies of racial attitudes, some of our best data about social desirability effect goes back at least eighty years.

Beginning in 1926, the sociologist Emory Bogardus started collecting survey data on racial attitudes in America. He devised a measure of prejudice in which he asked a sample of white college students to indicate how “socially close” they would allow members of specific groups. For example, asking a respondent to think of black Americans in general, would the respondent allow such a person to marry into his or her family? If not, then would close friendship be ok? No! How about letting a black American live in the neighborhood with you? The actual social distance scale items looked like the following.

- As close relatives by marriage
- As my close personal friends
- As neighbors on the same street
- As co-workers in the same occupation
- As citizens in my country
- As only visitors in my country
- Would exclude from my country

In 1926 Bogardus, using thirty target groups for his study, found clear patterns of prejudice in his sample of white college students. They would allow very close social distance to white, western European “targets”...
such as white, English people. However, as the named groups of people moved farther east and south of England, and as their skin colors got darker and their cultures less "Western", their social distance scores declined. Mediterranean groups were less acceptable than western Europeans, and African and Asian groups least acceptable of all. Bogardus repeated his studies in 1946, 1956 and 1966 using the same sorts of college student samples. Though he found that levels of prejudice declined over time, the same overall pattern of group preferences remained. These patterns were extremely stable, withstanding even cataclysmic events such as World War II. For example, the standing of Germans took a hit in the 1946 data. Germans had dropped four places, from their standing at seventh of thirty groups in 1926, to tenth place. But only ten years later, the 1956 data had them back in eighth position on the list. I believe it is a measure of the extreme stability of these social distance rankings that fighting a desperate war against Germany only diminished their relative standing by a few places in the estimation of the white Americans in Bogardus' study.

Scientists value highly such data that tracks important phenomena over time. It is rare that we have the resources and foresight to collect it consistently. So it seemed strange to me that after 1966 no one collected social distance data using Bogardus’ scale. (Bogardus died in 1973, but he had lots of graduate students and colleagues who could have continued the research.) The reason, it is clear, was the rise of social desirability effect. After World War II a number of intense cultural and political movements combined to influence what was socially acceptable for Americans to say and do. For example, stating that women should stay at home, or that black Americans were best suited to physical labor, would have raised few eyebrows before the 1960's. But after the widespread successes of the movements for racial civil rights and sexual equality in America, such comments became increasingly unacceptable here. The effect was clear in the attempt to measure prejudice with Bogardus’ scale. Respondents were no longer willing to state that one group was preferable to another, even if they privately held such beliefs. This brings us back to the Bradley effect. Pollsters were well aware that Americans who would not vote for a black candidate would likely not admit it. In order to appear to be without racial prejudice, they would lie about their intentions. So when Obama won the election by about the percentage that the polls had predicted, those of us who had been tracking the life of social desirability effect in America thought it might have finally expired. I say, not so much.

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PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2008
OBAMA/BIDEN CAMPAIGN
POLLING RESPONSE FORM

Instructions for field interviewers: After reading the following question to a respondent, check one of the spaces that follow.

“If the election for President of the United States were being held today, for which of the following candidates would you be most likely to vote?”

__ Respondent will vote for McCain/Palin
__ Respondent will vote for Obama/Biden
__ Respondent says he/she will vote for Obama/Biden, but is wearing a McCain/Palin button
__ Respondent says he/she will vote for Obama/Biden, but has his or her fingers crossed
__ Respondent says he/she will vote for Obama/Biden, but is smirking
__ Respondent says he/she will vote for Obama/Biden, but is rolling on the floor helpless with mirth

It is entirely possible that this election had the usual proportion of people who told pollsters that they were undecided or intending to vote for Obama, then voted against him. It’s just that this fact was masked by a number of other, unprecedented voting patterns. Among these were the following sorts of voters. There were, apparently, many who voted for Obama because he was black. They told pollsters that they could help make history for America by putting a minority candidate into office. Increased participation among black and Latino voters who voted disproportionately for Obama influenced the outcome. And there were young voters, who also voted disproportionately for Obama. In fact, young voters were underrepresented in pre-election polling because polling organizations had poor access to cell phone numbers in their random-digit dialing sampling procedures.

So, from this sociologist’s point of view, the Bradley effect is probably alive and well in America. There has been too long a history of documented social desirability effect in other research to conclude that the election of a black American to the presidency is evidence of its demise. And, lest you think that I am sorry to come to this conclusion, I want to make it clear that I think the unwillingness of Americans to publicly express their prejudices is a very good thing. To me it is a measure of our national disapproval of group hatreds. How can that be anything but a source of pride in our culture?

—William C. Levin is Professor of Sociology and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.