COMMENTARY

Hartigan: Race does matter, but not in the way that we expect

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All the many varied speculations about how race matters in the presidential election seem to have distilled into one question: whether racism will keep Barack Obama from being elected as the first African American to hold our country's highest office.

Commentators remain divided. Writing in Slate, Jacob Weisberg argues that, in an election that should be a banner year for Democrats, "racism is the only reason McCain might beat him." On the contrary, claims an editorial in The Wall Street Journal. Obama's perplexing inability to break open a significant lead the polls "has nothing to do with race." Rather, as the campaign's focus shifts towards foreign policy concerns, Obama's limited experience in office and in foreign affairs makes many Americans uneasy about electing him commander in chief. The certainty of these two positions belies an important aspect of race revealed by the campaign to date: Its significance grows more uncertain by the day.

From Obama's emergence as a serious contender for the Democratic nomination, numerous narratives have been formulated to explain what either his victory or defeat will reveal about how race matters in this country. One storyline posed him as a candidate that transcended race, heralding a "post racial" era in American politics. Another, expressed most succinctly by Geraldine Ferraro, posited Obama as benefiting from his racial identity, asserting that blackness, which was once stigmatized, is now an advantage in the age of multiculturalism. Still another narrative highlights the concern that his victory would bring a premature end to government efforts to remedy the effects of racial discrimination in this country.

It is easy to get caught up in this speculation and try to anticipate which narrative will be proven true. But this moment offers a greater opportunity — to take stock of the growing gap between what we know and don't know about the significance of race. After Election Day, whichever of these various narratives seems to be confirmed will still leave a good deal unexplained about the role race plays in American life today. These competing narratives illustrate that it is increasingly difficult to generalize about the way race matters in this country. That so many different versions of whether or how this election is about race are active at once reflects a great deal of uncertainty about its importance. As
well, that these contrary views of race all hang in the balance, waiting to be resolved by the election's outcome, indicate that the impact of race is really unknown. Rather than rush to uphold one certainty or another about race, it is worth acknowledging that this state of uncertainty itself is revealing.

This uncertainty allows us to consider that this election can be "about race" yet not entirely reducible to or explained by racism. We know from polling data that sizable portions of white and black voters cite race as a factor in their decisions about candidates. But is this racism? If we answer in the affirmative regarding whites' opinions but in the negative regarding blacks' views, we really don't grasp what this moment offers. Voters are actively thinking about race and how it matters in this most important decision. But it is not clear that this thinking singularly reflects racist sensibilities.

Consider the case of Obama's pick for vice president. Joe Biden generated the first big media controversy of this incredibly long campaign by characterizing Obama as "the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice looking guy." The implication of this statement — that a host of previous black public figures, from politicians to entertainers, were unclean and inarticulate — was actively critiqued by a variety of commentators. Eugene Robinson, writing in The Washington Post, especially criticized the way "articulate" is used to characterize well-educated and successful black public figures, as if this were a profoundly unexpected attribute. Notably, the word is rarely used to characterize similarly accomplished whites. The uproar over Biden's statement played a major role in bringing his candidacy to an early end.

Biden's comment was racial, but was it racist? Since it defies belief that Obama would select a racist as his running mate, we must anticipate that racism is not a sufficient explanation for the way race mattered in this instance. Biden's place on the Democratic ticket is just the latest indicator that this election may well be "about race," but we will need more than racism to explain how and why.

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