



# City on a Hill Press

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# BARACK

## THE VOTE



Barack Obama's relatively new Senatorial career, young face, and dark skin all set him apart from other candidates. But what will be the greatest obstacle to his presidential run:

Is he too green, or just too black?

**Daniel Zarchy**  
National News Reporter

Barack Obama has taken another step toward making history.

The freshman senator from Illinois—the sole African American in the Senate, and only the fifth in history—just may be the man to break the mold and become the nation's first non-white president.

Senator Obama (D-IL) was elected to the United States Senate in 2004—the silver lining in an otherwise torturous election for the Democrats. After giving the keynote address in that year's Democratic National Convention, Obama

showed his political capability and quickly became a major voice in the great rallying force that led to the Democratic Congressional washout last November, making him a popular figure leading into the presidential race.

However in a country once complicit with slavery and Jim Crow laws, and whose Senate is currently one percent African American,

despite the fact that African Americans make up 12 percent of the nation's entire population, the question remains: Is America ready to elect a black president?

### THE YOUTH VOTE

Analysts on both sides recognize that for Obama to win, he must mobilize the youth vote.

"Rock the Vote," a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing "political power for young people," registered 1.4 million people to vote in the 2004 election, according to its website.

Hans Riemer, political director for "Rock the Vote" and UC Santa Cruz alumnus, agrees that young voters may make the difference in this election.

"My own personal sense is that Obama is really going to motivate young people," he said. "He is probably this generation's Bill Clinton. It was an incredibly motivating experience to see someone like that get involved."

According to Martin Peadar at the Santa Cruz Country Clerk's office, 74 percent of registered 18 to 24 year-olds voted in the 2004 election,

Amaya Smith, a spokesperson for the Democratic National Committee, agrees that the youth vote could herald a change in national politics.

"We saw an increasing youth vote in the 2006 election," Smith said. "They voted in record numbers."

Smith also explained that younger voters tend to vote overwhelmingly on the Democratic side.

“As Democrats we very much value the youth vote and realize how essential it is to getting elected,” Smith said.

Riemer thinks that the changing demographic of the youth vote will have a significant impact on the election.

“There are many more African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians among the youth vote than there has ever been,” Riemer said. “With the young people, I don’t think there’s any question about whether or not they’d be ready to elect a minority candidate, or a woman. I think the question is more about the candidates themselves.”

Robert Reich, former secretary of labor under President Clinton, thinks Obama can legitimately stand against the competition.

“I think America is ready to elect a black president. Colin Powell could have been elected, had he run in 2000,” Reich said in an interview with *City on a Hill Press*. “There’s still racial prejudice, of course, but on electing a black president the nation is probably close to where it was in 1960 when it came to electing a Catholic [Kennedy]—still prejudiced, but willing and able to overcome it for the right candidate.”

John Brown Childs, professor of sociology at UC Santa Cruz, agrees.

“If you break it down by ethnicity and not race, there are many different white European ethnic groups who have still been excluded from the presidential process,” Childs explained. “If you get out of the black/white dichotomy, there’s another aspect there. I think there’s a barrier that’s been crossed. Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell are prime examples. There have been huge changes that make an Obama presidency possible. In terms of race, I think it is feasible in a way that it wasn’t 20 years ago.”

Michael Cowan, UCSC American studies professor, who is working this year in England directing the Education Abroad Program center in London, agrees that figures like Rice and Powell help Obama’s chances.

Cowan believes that it is important for people to remember Obama’s mixed heritage, coming from a white mother and a Kenyan father.

“His is a wonderful case study in the intersections of the world’s peoples,” Cowan said. “It’s conceivable that, under certain circumstances—and I stress ‘certain’—charisma can trump racism in American life today.”

## NEW TO THE GAME

Though Obama lacks the political experience of many other candidates, Professor Cowan feels Obama might not face as much criticism as expected.

“Obama’s lack of foreign policy experience may prove a handicap, but that lack evidently didn’t hurt Bush when he

ran in 2000,” Cowan said. “A fresh face in foreign policy, given the number of politicians who have been tarnished by their involvement in Iraq and the Middle East, might actually be a plus.”

Professor Childs, however, thinks that Obama’s relatively short political career may not have given him the experience necessary to run the country. He added that a better choice might be Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico, a Latino, who announced Sunday that he was entering the presidential race.

“In terms of [Richardson’s] background, experience and multicultural capability, I see him as a stronger candidate than Obama, just in terms of intrinsic resources,” Childs said.

Reverend Jesse Jackson, who was a prominent figure in the 1960s civil rights movement alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in the 1984 and 1988 elections. In 1984, Jackson had surprising success and won five primaries, which left him third in the polls. In the 1988 election, during which he won 11 primaries, Jackson ended up losing the Democratic nomination to Michael Dukakis.

Obama, on the other hand, may have the potential to appeal to a wider audience than Jackson did. According to Childs, Americans like Obama because he does not wear his race on his sleeve, and that Jackson’s proximity to the civil rights movement may have hurt his chance to get to the white house.

“At that time in U.S. history, it made him a less attractive candidate. It made it seem like he was working for one side of the population, whereas Obama looks like he appeals to a spectrum of the population,” Childs said.

However, when asked if people might vote for Obama simply because they wish to see a black president, Childs doubted it would be a consideration.

“I don’t see that happening at all, I think people will vote for him because people see that he transcends being black,” Childs said. “He is still African American, but [voters] would not vote for Jesse Jackson if he was running.”

Obama’s geniality, however, may deprive him of another source of constituents.

Sequilla Lee, publicity coordinator for the African/Black Student Alliance (A/BSA) at UCSC, said that Senator Obama has been a source of debate among A/BSA members. Though she personally disagreed, a number of people in the African-American community “didn’t see him as the proper person to represent African-Americans.

“Half of [A/BSA] thought it was a great idea, but didn’t think he would go through with it,” Lee said. “Others were not really for it. He grew up in Hawaii, and he didn’t really grow up as an African-American. He wasn’t born at the bottom.”

While Lee thought that Obama’s bid for candidacy is “a major step,” she was certain that wining election would be difficult for

Obama, and that he would face heavy opposition.

When asked if his race would hurt his chances in the election, Lee said “I don’t want to believe that it will, but I think people will be afraid of what will come next, just from him being on the ballot.”

## BREAKING INTO THE BELT

Obama, like all candidates, will have to survive the smear campaigns that Americans have come to expect each election year.

Eric Porter, UCSC American studies professor, said that for Obama to win, “a lot depends on how he gets portrayed in the media in the next year and a half.”

Porter, who had doubt that the country would elect a black candidate, also thinks that Obama’s short career might actually help his campaign.

“If you’ve been in the Senate a while, you’ve essentially got more of a record, and your voting record can be more of an issue,” Porter explained. As far as Obama goes, “People may not focus so much on his Senate record, but more on his vision, his ideals, and his character.”

Still, Cowan believes that there are other matters at hand, and agreed that not everybody on the left would welcome him with open arms.

“The first question to ask, of course, is ‘is the Democratic Party ready for a black candidate?’ Can that party conduct the battle for the nomination without making race even covertly a negative factor?” Cowan said.

If Obama were to win the Democratic nomination, which is hardly a certainty according to Cowan, questions remain about his ability to reach voters in important Southern states like Texas and Florida.

“I think he’d do well in California, New York, and Illinois, but he’d have to break into the Sunbelt,” Cowan said.

Riemer of Rock the Vote recognizes the importance of such states, but still thinks it’s anyone’s game.

“Those states are the swing states; Ohio is a good example. Whoever wins Ohio probably wins the election,” Riemer said. “I can’t see any reason to think that any one of [the candidates] is better than any other; that Hillary could win Ohio but Obama wouldn’t have a chance—that’s ridiculous.

“You could say that a white male would be more likely to win these states, but these are the white males who have to wear the albatross of Iraq around their necks,” Riemer continued. “This election may be a unique moment. In this election, things may be different.”

Conversely, Professor Childs thinks that neither Obama nor Richardson, or even Hillary Clinton, will ultimately win the Democratic nomination.

“When all of this is done, the Democrats are still probably going to elect a white, Anglo-Saxon male,” Childs said, “someone who’s not from a recognizable ethnic group. It’s the path of least resistance.”

“With the young people, I don’t think there’s any question about whether or not they’d be ready to elect a minority candidate, or a woman. I think the question is more about the candidates themselves.”

**Hans Riemer,  
Rock the Vote**