

Social Science: The creative voter. Obama and the class question

For the past two weeks, all eyes have focused on Barack Obama and race. A couple of weeks ago, it was Hillary Clinton's gender. A month before that, it was all about the Obama surge among young voters.

Pundits on all sides have framed this election - and especially the Democratic primary - as turning on the traditional fault lines of race, gender and generation.

The talk shows go on and on about how Mr. Obama is attracting black and young voters and how Ms. Clinton finds her voice among women and baby boomers.

But what is seldom discussed and yet most interesting about this election is not any young-vs.-old, black-vs.-white, or male-vs.-female dynamic.

At bottom, both the Democratic primary and the upcoming general election turn on an even deeper economic and social force: class.

In 2002, I defined a new creative class of inventors, entrepreneurs, engineers, artists, musicians, designers and professionals in idea-driven industries.

Today, nearly 40 million American workers fit into that group, 35 per cent of the total working population and a good deal more than the 23 per cent who make up the working class.

That the creative class drives economic success in cities and nations is undeniable; the "spiky" regions that drive our economic success today - from the Boston-Washington corridor to San Francisco and the Pacific Northwest - are doing so because they are magnets for the entrepreneurial and talented members of this class.

Up to this point, creative-class people have predominantly cast themselves as politically independent or "post-partisan," and their political sympathies have been up for grabs.

The traditional Republican platform of individualism, economic opportunity and fiscal responsibility appeals to them; but so, too, do the Democratic values of social liberalism, environmentalism and a progressive track record on gay and women's rights.

Democratic candidates such as Bill Bradley and Howard Dean attracted the creative class in the 2000 and 2004 elections. But no one has caught fire with this class like Barack Obama.

I knew it was time for a closer look when MTV called me to comment on the Obama-and-the-creative-class phenomenon.

After poring over detailed exit-poll data on race, income and ideological orientation, Chris Bowers, the Netroots blogger, concluded: "When all is said and done, it looks like Obama will ultimately owe his victory to African Americans and his huge, creative-class activist army."

To get a better sense of how this deep this support runs, I asked opinion pollster John Zogby to look into how creative-class people were voting in this primary season.

The result: On issue after issue, they preferred Mr. Obama to either Ms. Clinton or Republican John McCain by wide margins.

Asked which presidential candidate would "provide meaningful leadership for the country," 64 per cent of creative-class respondents said Mr. Obama, compared with roughly 21 per cent for Ms. Clinton and 9 per cent for Mr. McCain. On the question of who was best positioned to unify the country, Mr. Obama was chosen by 74 per cent of creative-class voters.

The same basic pattern holds across the board: The creative class prefers Mr. Obama on issue after issue, from illegal immigration to the economy and health care.

Mr. Obama even bests Ms. Clinton and Mr. McCain substantially on the issue where he is allegedly weakest - "combatting terrorism" - registering 50 per cent of creative-class support compared with 24 per cent for Ms. Clinton and 18 per cent for Mr. McCain.

What we're seeing is not a red-state, blue-state divide, but something much bigger, if more calibrated.

Mr. Obama consistently polls strongest in cities and regions with significant creative-class concentrations. Ms. Clinton, on the other hand, has scored better in industrial states with dominant blue-collar towns, where voters are anxious about the economy and job prospects.

Ms. Clinton is more popular among voters without college degrees. Meanwhile, Duke University political scientist Brendan Nyhan has crunched numbers that show a college education to be a big predictor for Obama support.

This divergence in the electorate raises an interesting dilemma for campaign strategists.

Is a coalition between the creative class and working class even viable? Appealing to them both will prove difficult. The creative class anticipates the future while the working class is, in many senses, seeking protection from it. The creative class does not want someone to fight for it; the us-against-them meme doesn't resonate with them in politics any more than it does in a conference room, film studio or the skunk works of a high-tech start-up.

It will be difficult for Ms. Clinton to win wholehearted endorsement of the creative class, as committed as she is to specific programs.

It will also be hard for Mr. Obama's rhetoric of hope and change to resonate with those who are falling farther and farther behind economically. In coming years, it will be vitally important for progressive political leaders to reach out to the working and service classes, and in ways that enable them to connect to the new creative economy.

But in the short months remaining until the general election, deep-seated working-class anxiety about economic and social change is not likely to be overcome.

Clearly, neither race, gender, nor age can provide the core support necessary for a sustainable political majority. Just as Franklin Delano Roosevelt forged a new majority on the swelling ranks of blue-collar workers, so must the candidate and party that hope to win this election, and shape the political landscape for years to come, gain the support of today's ascending economic and political force - the creative class.

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