

Obama's Historic Win

Last night's Iowa Caucus was remarkable for a number of reasons. The victories of Barack Obama and Mike Huckabee have long term implications for how we as political observers interpret both African American and evangelical politics.

No one can seriously argue that Obama's win last night was anything less than historic. That a black man could win a presidential caucus in an overwhelmingly white state is nothing short of miraculous and a testament to the progress that this country has made in accepting candidates of color for high office. Many pundits have suggested that if Obama wins New Hampshire, this should allay the concerns of skeptical black voters who want to support Obama but are afraid that whites would never vote for him. These types of strategic calculations, though, are only part of the puzzle in determining black support for Obama as a candidate. Victories in both Iowa and New Hampshire go a long way to address the strategic fears of black voters who never thought they would live to see a black president. However, Obama cannot assume at this point that he has locked up the black vote. While I suspect that his lead over Hillary Clinton among African American voters in South Carolina will be buoyed by last night's results, Obama still has to court African American voters, some of whom are still skeptical of him as a black leader. As the Pew Foundation reported in their recent survey on race relations, half of black voters thought Obama shared the values of the black community a lot. This is good, but those numbers decline among poorer and less educated blacks. This suggests that Obama still has to cultivate support across the black community. One cannot assume that black voters will follow white voters in Iowa blindly to the polls and vote for Obama just because he is a black man with a better chance of winning the nomination now. He must continue to ask for their votes and invest in the resources to guarantee a high turnout of African American voters in South Carolina and beyond.

The biggest story of last night was actually Obama's support among independent and Republican voters. His ability to garner votes outside of the traditional Democratic base helps us to begin to answer the question of his electability in a general election. Independent voters were the penultimate swing voters of 2004 and 2006; if Obama can continue to pull in primary votes from unaffiliated voters and from genuine Republican enthusiasts who can cross party lines in open primaries, it makes him a formidable contender in a general election match-up.

Huckabee's victory is remarkable for different reasons. Huckabee's genuine compassionate conservative ethos stands in sharp contrast to the cultural warrior posture embraced by people such as the late Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. That Huckabee won a majority of evangelical votes in Iowa without the endorsement of Pat Robertson, Paul Weyrich, or Gary Bauer suggests a shift in evangelical politics. While family values are still important to these voters, other types of values issues, such as addressing poverty, are also important as evangelical voters evaluate candidates.

Whereas a year ago, many predicted the death of the evangelical political movement, Huckabee's win last night suggests that the movement is alive, well, but in a state of transition.

Finally, a lot of attention has focused on last night's record turnout. It is no accident that an increase in manpower coincided with an increase in turnout. These staffers and volunteers invested more energy in reaching out to voters at doors and over the phone, (which if done properly have been experimentally proven to increase turnout) and this paid off with higher turnout.

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