

Democrats divide by race, gender, class

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CINCINNATI (Reuters) - It's now common wisdom that Sen. Hillary Clinton attracts older voters, women and the white working class, while Sen. Barack Obama is the go-to guy for youth, African-Americans and the elite.

Retired teacher Maggie Lauria, 58, fits the mold.

"For us women, our time has come," Lauria said at a rally on Wednesday for Clinton in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

That the Democratic candidates battling to be the party's nominee for the November presidential election became so closely identified with certain voter segments has been chalked up to demographics and campaign tactics -- or mistakes.

After a big win for Obama in the North Carolina primary and a narrow Clinton victory in Indiana on Tuesday, Obama holds a big lead over Clinton in the contest for the nomination, but Clinton has vowed to stay in the race.

Exit polls from the Indiana primary showed about six in 10 voters under age 30 favored Obama, while seven of 10 aged 65 and over chose Clinton. Six in 10 whites voted for Clinton, and 90 percent of blacks favored Obama.

Gender, race and age divides can be explained by voters opting for the candidate who most resembles them. Clinton, 61, would be the first female U.S. president, while Obama, 46, would be the first black to take the Oval Office.

But working-class voters opting for Clinton and more educated professionals choosing Obama has analysts scratching their heads a bit.

"I think it is merely an accident of history that Obama's rhetoric -- which was meant to appeal to all -- had greatest resonance with those thirstiest for change. And they happened to be the liberal elites frustrated with eight years of the Bush administration," said Chapman Rackaway, a political science professor at Fort Hays State University in Kansas.



CREDIT:

Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (D-NY) listens to a question as she campaigns in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, May 7, 2008. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque



CREDIT:

US Democratic presidential candidate Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) speaks during a campaign stop in High Point, North Carolina May 5, 2008.

SIMILAR POLICIES

Both Clinton and Obama went to top universities -- she to Wellesley, he to Harvard -- and both are now wealthy. Obama, raised by a single mother, had a more modest childhood, but neither did manual labor to make ends meet.

The policy positions are similar enough that the average voter cannot see a difference.

"When policies are nearly identical, voters have to turn elsewhere, and they'll turn to things like character and the common backgrounds," said James Campbell, a professor at the State University of New York-Buffalo and author of "The American Campaign."

Campbell believes Obama got tagged as elite simply because some of his strongest support was on college campuses.

"Sometimes candidates become known by who their supporters are, and it becomes almost a self-fulfilling image. So if you have a bunch of academics and college kids at your rallies, you get branded with that image," Campbell said.

Clinton has emerged as the defender of the working class -- voters once claimed by rival Sen. John Edwards, who dropped out of the race.

"A lot of it tracks back to the Arkansas roots of her husband and that's how she made her break into politics," said University of South Florida professor Susan MacManus, referring to the poor Southern state where Bill Clinton was governor.

Obama's upbringing by a single mother was played down, while his Harvard education got a lot of notice.

"His campaign perhaps overcompensated for what they were afraid of what is going to be the stereotype ... and his education was used to fill in for what some might regard as a lack of resume for this kind of job," said Campbell.

"I'd be willing to bet most people don't know he was raised by a single mom," said MacManus.

The elite tag hurt Obama, but huge youth turnout has buoyed his campaign. Clinton lacks youth support, but working-class union members are considered more reliable on election day.

Bryan Jones, director of the Center for American Politics and Public Policy at the University of Washington, said the divide between intellectuals and the working class is an age-old problem among Democrats.

Obama tried to bridge the divide by appealing to everyone in early, inspirational speeches about hope and change, Jones said, but didn't talk often enough about economic challenges facing ordinary Americans.

As front-runner, Obama has changed his rhetoric to appeal to the working class, Jones said. "He's still going to win, but it's going to be tough," he said. "He caught on a bit late."

(Additional reporting by Jeff Mason; Editing by Cynthia Osterman)

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