

July 29, 2008, 6:01 pm

The Power of the Protest Vote

By ANDREW KOHUT

Don't be surprised if third or fourth party presidential candidates garner enough votes in November to make a difference in some of the hotly contested swing states. The polls show more than enough Republican disaffection with John McCain's candidacy to make a case that Bob Barr, the Libertarian candidate, or another right-of-center candidate could take votes away from the G.O.P. standard bearer. And on the Democratic side, Barack Obama has to worry about defections of not only Hillary Clinton's supporters, but also of liberals, who are beginning to grumble that he is moving too much toward the center.

The 2000 presidential election clearly showed that third party candidates do not have to roll up big numbers to make a huge difference. Ralph Nader accumulated just 2 percent of the vote in Florida — and exit polls found that Al Gore was the second choice among most of Mr. Nader's voters. While Democratic voters were never wildly enthusiastic about Mr. Gore during that campaign, the climate of opinion about John McCain is more fragile this year.

	June 1996	June 2000	Aug 2004	June 2008
	%	%	%	%
Dem candidate	55	46	47	48
% Strongly	40	40	59	58
Rep candidate	40	45	45	40
% Strongly	32	44	71	34
Other/Undec.	5	9	8	12
	100	100	100	100
Candidates:	Clinton Dole	Gore Bush	Kerry Bush	Obama McCain

Based on registered voters.

Pew's nationwide voter poll in late June revealed that significantly fewer McCain supporters than Obama supporters say they are strongly committed to their candidate. Mr. McCain engenders less commitment than George W. Bush enjoyed at this stage in his presidential campaigns. Indeed, the disparity in strong support for

the two candidates this year is the largest measured in the last two decades. Among supporters of each candidate, almost twice as many describe themselves as strong Obama backers compared with McCain backers (58 percent vs. 34 percent).

Mr. McCain's standing is in stark contrast to the support for Mr. Bush four years ago, when the vast majority of Bush voters (71 percent) said they backed him strongly. In June 2000, committed Bush backers constituted only 44 percent of his support, but this was significantly more than Mr. McCain now registers. You have to go back to Bob Dole in 1996 to match the current lack of enthusiasm for John McCain.

Today, Republican voter malaise is evident in a number of other ways, as well. Uncharacteristically, fewer Republicans than Democrats say it really matters who wins the presidential election (62 percent vs. 70 percent). And while 74 percent of Democrats say they are satisfied with the candidates, only 49 percent of Republicans feel this way.

While the Democrats and the Obama campaign can take some comfort in these numbers, there are potential problems for them, too. Barack Obama has a unity problem. Hillary Clinton's supporters have moved in Mr. Obama's direction since the primaries ended, but only 72 percent say they would back him if the election were held today. In particular, Mr. Obama is not polling well among white women. Mr. McCain and Mr. Obama are running about even among this important voter bloc and he trails Mr. McCain among older women, despite the strong Democratic disposition of this group.

Could a small number of disappointed Clinton supporters be attracted to a third party candidate? Sure. Perhaps more important, there is the question of whether Mr. Obama can live up to the expectations that his liberal backers have about his commitment to change. The Times' William Yardley reported recently that critics on the left are emerging in response to Mr. Obama's positions on the war in Iraq, wiretapping, gun control and the death penalty.

While there is little indication of this in Pew's polling data, our latest survey finds a rise in support of the idea of a third party candidate among people who have been ardent Obama backers: young voters, liberals and independents.

Nonetheless, given the level of enthusiasm for Mr. Obama, it is unlikely that a left-of-center third party candidate could draw major support, but certainly matching Mr. Nader's 2000 numbers in Florida cannot be ruled out. And on the Republican side, the door is wide open for a third party to matter. In fact, polls conducted by Fox News, The Los Angeles Times and ABC/Washington Post now have about 7 percent of the vote going either to Mr. Barr or Mr. Nader. Whatever the limitations of these candidates' personal appeal, either or both could be protest candidates.

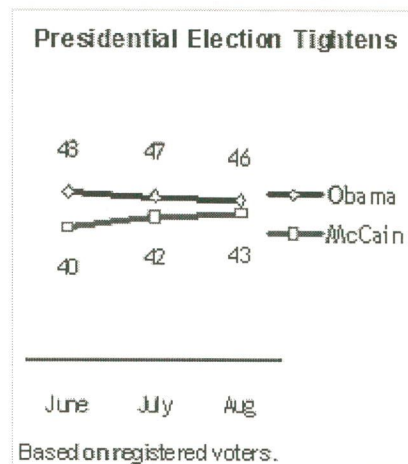
August 22, 2008, 6:01 pm

Obama Fatigue?

By ANDREW KOHUT

Andrew Kohut is the president of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (Full biography.)

As Democrats gather in Denver, many may be looking at the national polls and wondering how the presidential race has tightened so much given that voters are still concerned about the state of the nation and give low ratings to President Bush and the Republican Party. There are now at least four recent polls showing Barack Obama's lead narrowing to three percentage points.



Based

on a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press poll.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press poll last week found Barack Obama's lead over his Republican rival withering. In late June, Mr. Obama held a comfortable eight-point margin over John McCain. A look at these latest trends suggests that while Mr. McCain has made some gains over the last two months, perceptions of Mr. Obama have stalled.

Most important, Mr. McCain has been more successful in rallying Republicans to his side than Mr. Obama has been in unifying the Democratic Party. Indeed, Mr. McCain is now garnering more support from Republicans and white evangelical Protestants than he had June, and steadily gained backing from white working-class voters over the last two months.

In contrast, Mr. Obama made little progress in increasing his support among core Democrats since June. In August, 83 percent

of Democrats favored him compared with 87 percent of Republicans who back Mr. McCain. And the poll found that the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate was still getting only modest support (72 percent) from Hillary Clinton's former supporters.

A second factor appears to be Obama fatigue. During the summer, the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism found much more extensive media coverage of Mr. Obama than Mr. McCain. This has proved a problem, not a blessing, for the Democratic candidate.

Many Think Obama Is Overexposed				
How much have you been hearing about Barack Obama?	Total Rep Dem Ind			
	%	%	%	%
Too much	48	67	34	51
Too little	10	8	8	10
Right amount	41	24	57	38
Don't know	1	1	1	1
	100	100	100	100

How much have you been hearing about John Mc Cain?	Total Rep Dem Ind			
	%	%	%	%
Too much	26	10	35	28
Too little	38	52	26	41
Right Amount	35	37	38	30
Don't know	1	1	1	1
	100	100	100	100

Based

on an early August Pew survey.

An early August Pew survey found 48 percent of respondents saying they had heard "too much" about Barack Obama. Just 26 percent in the poll said they had heard too much about John McCain, while 38 percent reported that they had heard too little about the likely Republican nominee.

Mr. Obama's extensive media exposure did not result in giving voters a fuller or better sense of who he is politically. A mid-July Pew survey found 59 percent of voters saying they knew little or nothing about his foreign policy positions, and 49 percent said the same about his economic positions. Knowledge of the Democratic candidate's foreign policy positions was unchanged from a March poll.

Voters were expressing Obama fatigue in response to a torrent of media coverage that did not add much to their understanding of the candidate. These frustrations may have been reinforced by the

McCain campaign's advertisement that portrayed Mr. Obama as the celebrity candidate.

Conversely, John McCain has enjoyed relative prosperity with less media attention and fewer people in Pew's weekly surveys saying that he is the candidate that they have been hearing a lot about. As a result, he avoided voters connecting him to President Bush and wondering whether he is a "different kind" of Republican.

A third factor in the tightening of the race is Barack Obama's lack of progress on his Achilles heel: concerns about his lack of experience. This month, when asked what troubles them most about the Democratic candidate, voters said his "personal abilities and experience." As many as 40 percent of people who say they will not vote or may not for Mr. Obama cite his experience as the problem. For comparison, when John Kerry and Al Gore ran for president, only 6 percent cited their experience as a problem. Along these lines, this week's CBS/New York Times poll found 44 percent thinking that Mr. Obama has prepared himself well enough for the job of president, but 68 percent thought that about Mr. McCain.

Clearly the last few months have been a rough patch for Barack Obama, but voters have a long list of potential problems with John McCain, too. There is nothing inexorable about these horse-race trends. They do, however, stake out quite clearly what Mr. Obama has to do next week: Rally the base, especially Clinton supporters, and shine a light on Mr. McCain that resonates with voter discontent toward Bush and the G.O.P. And most important, he needs to alleviate concerns about his readiness to serve as commander in chief.

September 25, 2008, 3:18 pm

Uncertain Times

By ANDREW KOHUT

John McCain's decision to suspend his campaign and to call for postponing the first debate adds yet more uncertainty to a presidential campaign that is far more difficult to predict than any of the previous six elections in which I have worked.

This is not just my opinion; the most reliable forecasters in the country — the voters themselves — agree with me. In every recent election the public has accurately picked the winner by this time in the cycle — not this year. Two weeks ago when we asked voters to put aside their own preferences and make a prediction, 39 percent said Mr. McCain would win and exactly the same number chose Barack Obama. Four years ago in September, the race was close, but by a 60 percent to 22 percent margin voters thought President Bush would be re-elected.

More Uncertainty About This Election			
<i>Most likely to win ...</i>			
	Rep. Candidate	Dem. Candidate	Don't Know
	%	%	%
Sept. 2008	39	39	22
Sept. 2004	60	22	18
Late Oct. 2000	48	38	14
Early Oct. 2000	33	46	21
Early Sept. 1996	16	75	9
Oct. 1992	30	61	9

Based on registered voters.

In 2000 at this time, voters believed Al Gore would win. But they changed their mind by late October and picked George W. Bush. In 1992 and 1996, boxcar majorities (61 percent and 75 percent, respectively) thought Clinton would win.

Why is there so little consensus in this election? For starters, voters are unsure whether John McCain, if elected, would govern differently from President Bush: 44 percent think he would, but an equal number think he wouldn't. And opinion about this basic question has not changed at all since March.

Second, while the country leans Democratic because of strong discontent with President Bush and the condition of the country, only 47 percent of the electorate thinks that Barack Obama is well qualified to be president. That is what voters most often say troubles them about his candidacy.

Third, although race is not explicitly a campaign issue, it is very much on the minds of voters, especially Democrats. Indeed, 56 percent of Democrats believe that many people will not vote for Mr. Obama because he is black.

Fourth, polls have consistently shown that a sizable number of people (45 percent) think that Mr. Obama may not be tough enough when it comes to foreign policy and national security. But almost as many voters (42 percent), said they worried that John McCain will take America into another war.

Finally, Sarah Palin has only added more uncertainty to the equation. While the Alaska governor has energized the Republican base, many independent voters are of two minds about her. Sixty percent of independents hold a favorable opinion of her, but as many of them say she is not qualified to serve as president, if required, according to last week's New York Times/CBS News poll.

These and other campaign cross pressures have the electorate in a state of high anxiety. As many as 51 percent in Pew's early September poll said the word risky applies to Mr. Obama, and almost as many — 46 percent — said the word applied to Mr. McCain. How voters minimize the risk factor in making their choice will decide the election.

Will Mr. McCain's latest decision be seen as a bold selfless gesture for the sake of the nation or as a calculated political move designed to stall Mr. Obama's recent resurgence in the polls? Only the uncertain voters can answer that question and for now the uncertainty continues.

September 10, 2008, 11:49 pm

The Bounce Effect

By ANDREW KOHUT

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The post-convention polls are in and they show John McCain getting quite a bounce from his convention. He not only wiped out the lift in the polls that Barack Obama got from his convention, but he is now polling better than he has at any point this year in most surveys.

McCain's Convention Bounce		
	Pre- Conventions	Post- Conventions
	%	%
CBS News		
McCain	42	46
Obama	45	44
Don't Know/Other/Refused	<u>13</u>	<u>10</u>
	100	100
ABC/Wash Post		
McCain	43	46
Obama	49	47
Don't Know/Other/Refused	<u>8</u>	<u>7</u>
	100	100
Gallup		
McCain	43	50
Obama	47	46
Don't Know/Other/Refused	<u>10</u>	<u>4</u>
	100	100

Based on registered voters.

The CBS poll, which was conducted from Sept. 5 to Sept. 7, has Mr. McCain at 46 percent and Mr. Obama at 44 percent among a national sample of registered voters. Prior to the conventions that poll tipped to Mr. Obama — 45 percent to 42 percent. The ABC/Washington Post survey taken at the same time shows a similar trend. And the Gallup surveys show an even more pronounced gain in support for the Republican candidate among registered voters, with Mr. McCain leading with 50 percent to Mr. Obama's 46 percent. Other national polls also show movement in a Republican direction. There is little doubt that the fall election campaign begins in earnest with Mr. McCain having gained the momentum.

The question is, how good an indicator is this of where the electorate is headed on Nov. 4? A historical look at recent elections shows mixed results. In five of the seven elections since 1980, the candidate with the lead in early September went on to victory in November. In only two elections did the leading candidate go on to lose the election. But the record also suggests that when there was a change in momentum, in three cases that candidate won the election, and in two he was defeated.

In 1980, the Gallup poll found President Jimmy Carter tying the race after the Democratic convention, having trailed challenger Ronald Reagan by as much as 53 percent to 37 percent during the summer. President Carter maintained a small lead through much of the fall, only to lose it for good in late October after the only presidential debate.

In 1984, President Reagan held a sizable lead over his Democratic opponent in Gallup polls both before and after the G.O.P. convention — and easily won the election by a huge 59 percent to 41 percent margin.

Vice President George H.W. Bush trailed Michael Dukakis in the polls for much of the spring and summer of 1988. But he jumped to a nine-point lead in the Gallup poll following the Republican convention, and never trailed Mr. Dukakis again.

Bill Clinton registered a solid gain in support from the 1992 convention, even though much of the dynamic in his campaign against incumbent President Bush came from Ross Perot, the third party candidate, dropping in and out of the race. The 1996 election was never much of a contest. President Clinton held a big lead both before and after the convention, and there was little movement in voter attitudes.

In 2000, Vice President Al Gore got a boost from the Democratic convention. Before the conventions, a survey by Professional Research Consultants showed the race neck and neck, with George W. Bush at 42 percent and Mr. Gore at 41 percent. Their September survey found Mr. Gore leading at 47 percent and Mr. Bush at 41 percent. But the vice president's momentum did not hold, ultimately ending up as one of the closest elections in recent American history.

In 2004, President Bush gained support following the Republican convention and led challenger John Kerry with 49 percent to 43 percent in Pew's early September survey. However, the race tightened subsequently.

So what is the appropriate model for 2008? Is it more like 1988, 1992 and 2004, when September momentum mattered? Or is it like 1980 or 2000, when ultimately it did not? While each election has its own dynamic, a number of factors suggest that this contest is a hard one to call early.

First, despite the McCain bounce, for the most part the polls continue to show a close race. The public is evenly divided between the candidates, which is pretty much where things stood before the conventions.

Second, Sarah Palin is still an unknown factor in this election. The Alaska governor was a hit in St. Paul: a Pew survey this week found voters saying that her speech, not John McCain's, was the highlight of the convention for them. But voters still know little about her, many have doubts about her qualifications and her national debut in St. Paul was only the beginning of her introduction to the public.

Third, the debates loom as events at least as significant as the conventions. In 1980 and 2000, the debates were game changers for Jimmy Carter and Al Gore, both of whom had enjoyed significant convention bounces.

Finally, the fundamentals continue to favor the Democrats. Discontentment with the economy, President Bush's low ratings and the greater number of voters this year who consider themselves Democrats suggest that, absent the unexpected, the horse race will probably remain close between now and November. That said, the unexpected has been the norm in 2008.

The New York Times

Campaign Stops

Strong Opinions on the 2008 Election

OCTOBER 29, 2008, 9:30 PM

The Element of Surprise

By ANDREW KOHUT

Andrew Kohut is the president of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (Full biography.)

The last surprise in a surprising election campaign seems to be that there may be no surprises come Election Day. As recently as a month ago, this analyst and the American public itself were throwing up our hands and saying we can't figure this one out — too many intangibles.

Source: Pew Research Center

Well things have changed. Barack Obama leads John McCain by a 52-percent-to-36 percent margin in Pew's latest survey, and while uncertainties about the final outcome remain, Americans are no longer deadlocked over who's going to win the election. Regardless of their own preferences, they pick Mr. Obama by a wide margin.

What happened during the last month to change the polls and the American public's assessment of who is going to win? In part, the answer is simple: the campaign happened and it mattered. But the Wall Street meltdown happened and it mattered, too.

In particular, the debates had a big impact on perceptions of the candidates. Starting with the first presidential debate and then progressing over the course of the two that followed, the public became more comfortable with Mr. Obama. An increasing number of voters came to see him as qualified, and they became less comfortable with Mr. McCain.

The Arizona senator's initial advantage as the candidate who would exercise the best judgment in a crisis narrowed markedly following the first debate. By the third debate, a Pew poll found the judgment gap reversed: 41 percent saw Mr. McCain as "having poor judgment," while 29 percent said this trait described Mr. Obama. Furthermore, a growing number of voters said that the Republican candidate was too old in the aftermath of the third debate.

Views of Sarah Palin may have contributed to questions about Mr. McCain's judgment. As the public got to know more about the Alaska governor, views about her shifted significantly. Even before the vice presidential debate, the voters had changed their minds about whether she was qualified to be president, although they continued to have a positive view of her personally. In mid-September, favorable opinions of Ms. Palin outnumbered negative ones by 54 percent to 32 percent despite reservations about her qualifications.

By the end of October, however, her personal image had flopped as well — 49 percent of voters expressed an unfavorable opinion of Ms. Palin, while 44 percent had a favorable view. Most important, Pew's analyses showed that, as was not the case with virtually all other vice presidential candidates over the years, opinions of Ms. Palin mattered to the

ticket. There is a clear correlation between views of her and voters' intentions. In contrast, views of Joe Biden, while mostly positive, do not appear to affect the electoral equation.

Ms. Palin's slumping numbers may well reflect voter backlash against Republican attacks on Barack Obama, with which she has been strongly associated. By mid-October, a steadily growing number of voters (56 percent, up from 42 percent a month earlier) were saying that the McCain campaign has been too personally critical of Mr. Obama.

All of this happened as Wall Street was melting down and the economy became not only the top issue, but virtually the only issue that concerned voters. George W. Bush's approval ratings hit new lows and discontent with national conditions hit an all-time high in Pew surveys. In every Pew survey since the crisis hit the headlines, Mr. Obama has led Mr. McCain by nearly 20 points as the candidate able to deal with the economic crisis.

With less than a week to go, the Obama campaign seems poised for a win — perhaps a big one. But there are still a couple of unknowns. First and foremost, while voters are more trusting of Mr. Obama than they were in early September, they continue to have reservations about him. Pew's mid-October survey, which found Mr. Obama ahead of Mr. McCain by 14 points on the horse race measure at the same time found a near majority of voters (48 percent) saying the word "risky" applied to the Democratic candidate.

It is fair to say that doubts about Mr. Obama have not disappeared, but American voters seem to have become more comfortable with these doubts. Race continues to be a factor, albeit probably a small one, and it is possible that polls may be under-sampling intolerant voters.

Of course, never rule out the unexpected, especially in an election where the unexpected has happened so often. And taking American voters for granted is not a good idea.

October 12, 2008

FUNNY NUMBERS

Do Polls Lie About Race?

By KATE ZERNIKE

THREE weeks to Election Day and polls project a victory, possibly a big one, for Barack Obama.

Yet everywhere, anxious Democrats wring their hands. They've seen this Lucy-and-the-football routine before, and they're just waiting for their ball to be snatched away, the foiled Charlie Browns again. Remember how the exit polls in 2004 predicted President Kerry?

The anxiety is more acute this year, because Senator Obama is the first African-American major-party presidential nominee. And even pollsters say they can't be sure how accurately polls capture people's feelings about race, or how forthcoming Americans are in talking about a black candidate.

In recent days, nervous Obama supporters have traded worry about a survey — widely disputed by pollsters yet voraciously consumed by the politically obsessed — that concluded racial bias would cost Mr. Obama six percentage points in the final outcome. He is, of course, about six points ahead in current polls. See? He's going to lose.

If he does, it wouldn't be the first time that polls have overstated support for an African-American candidate. Since 1982, people have talked about the Bradley effect, where even last-minute polls predict a wide margin of victory, yet the black candidate goes on to lose, or win in a squeaker. (In the case that lent the phenomenon its name, Tom Bradley, the mayor of Los Angeles, lost his race for governor, the assumption being that voters lied to pollsters about their support for an African-American.)

But pollsters and political scientists say concern about a Bradley effect — some call it a Wilder effect or a Dinkins effect, and plenty call it a theory in search of data — is misplaced. It obscures what they argue is the more important point: there are plenty of ways that race complicates polling. Considered alone or in combination, these factors could produce an unforeseen Obama landslide with surprise victories in the South, a stunningly large Obama loss, or a recount-thin margin. In a year that has already turned expectations upside down, it is hard to completely reassure the fretters.

Among the non-Bradley factors at the intersection of race and polling is something called the reverse Bradley (perhaps more prevalent than the Bradley), in which polls understate support for a black candidate, particularly in regions where it is socially acceptable to express distrust of blacks. Then there are the voters not captured by polls. Research shows that those who refuse to participate in surveys tend to be less likely to vote for a black candidate. The race of the questioner, too, affects a poll — but no one is sure whether people give more or less accurate answers when they're interviewed by someone of their own race.

“How much we are under-representing people who are intolerant and therefore unlikely to vote for Obama is

an open question,” said Andrew Kohut, the president of Pew Research Center. “I suspect not a great deal, but maybe some. And ‘maybe some’ could be crucial in a tight election.”

In 1982, exit polls had Mayor Bradley so likely to win that newspaper headlines called him the victor. Yet he lost, narrowly. There emerged what seemed like a pattern: a number of polls found more support than there actually was for Harold Washington in the 1983 Chicago mayoral race; for David N. Dinkins in the 1989 New York mayoral race; and for L. Douglas Wilder in the 1989 Virginia governor’s race.

Were people so afraid to appear bigoted that they lied to pollsters, thinking it more socially acceptable to support a black candidate? Pollsters and political scientists have long questioned that assumption because they do not believe people have an incentive to deceive unless they are explicitly asked, “Do you support the white guy or the black guy?”

“We have no evidence that people lie to us,” said Joe Lenski, executive vice president of Edison Media Research, which conducts the exit polls the television networks use. He and others say that discrepancy in the polls has more to do with which people decline to participate, or say they are undecided.

Adam Berinsky, a political scientist at M.I.T. who has written about the “I don’t know” voters, points out that while polls overpredicted Mr. Dinkins’s support in 1989, they got it right in 1993, when he was running against the same opponent, Rudolph Giuliani. In 1989, Mr. Berinsky argues, people who feared being thought racist said “I don’t know.” By 1993, they could find things in Mr. Dinkins’s mayoral record to object to and so felt more free to express their opposition without fear of seeming racist.

Mr. Kohut conducted a study in 1997 looking at differences between people who readily agreed to be polled and those who agreed only after one or more callbacks. Reluctant participants were significantly more likely to have negative attitudes toward blacks — 15 percent said they had a “very favorable” attitude toward them, as opposed to 24 percent of the ready respondents. “The kinds of people suspicious of surveys are also more intolerant,” Mr. Kohut said.

Scott Keeter, Pew’s director of survey research, said pollsters had a harder time reaching voters with lower levels of education. Less-educated whites are the kind Mr. Obama has had trouble winning over. Conversely, young people are more likely to answer surveys, and they tend to favor Mr. Obama.

There may be several factors at work: Michael Traugott, a University of Michigan professor who studies polling, argues that the Bradley effect was misnamed from the start; the problem with the polls in the 1982 race was not that they failed to capture latent racism but that they failed to account for the absentee ballots, which ultimately handed the election to the white Republican, George Deukmejian.

Whatever its causes, the Bradley gap seems to be disappearing.

In a new study, Daniel J. Hopkins, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard, considered 133 elections between 1989 and 2006 and found that blacks running for office before 1996 suffered a median Bradley effect of 3 percentage points. Blacks running after 1996, however, performed about 3 percentage points better than their polls predicted. Mr. Hopkins argues that the changes in the welfare laws in 1996 and the decline of violent crime took off the table issues that had aggravated racial animosity.

The Bradley effect in the 2006 vote was largely absent (and in some stances a reverse effect was seen by some pollsters). In Tennessee, Harold Ford Jr., a black congressman, lost by six points. His pollster, Pete Brodnitz, said the campaign had been watching for a Bradley effect and screened carefully to make sure its own polls looked only at the people most likely to vote. Internal polls were largely correct, but some public polls, relying on a more general population, were wildly off. Mr. Brodnitz blamed bad polling, not lying.

In this year's Democratic primaries, University of Washington researchers found a Bradley effect in three states, but a reverse Bradley effect in 12 (in the other 17, polls were within a seven-point margin of error).

The results tended to correlate with the black population in a state: blacks made up 15 percent or more of the population in almost all the states where the polls showed less support for Mr. Obama than there actually was; in the three states where polls showed more support than there was, less than 10 percent of the population is black.

The differences are too great to be explained by just high black turnout, said Anthony Greenwald, one of the researchers. Nor were people necessarily lying. Instead, he sees a cultural dynamic at work: the states where polls underpredicted support for Mr. Obama were generally in the Southeast, where the culture has more stubbornly favored whites, so the "right" answer there was to choose the white candidate. In the three states where polls in the study overpredicted support for Mr. Obama — Rhode Island, California and New Hampshire — "the desirable thing is to appear unbiased and unprejudiced," Mr. Greenwald said. (Many polling experts also believe that Mr. Obama was benefiting from an Iowa bounce in the late New Hampshire polls, as Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton had been ahead for months, and that therefore Mr. Obama's loss there was not a true Bradley effect.)

The Bradley effect, Mr. Greenwald concluded, "has conceptually mutated." "It's not something that's an absolute that we should generally expect, but something that will vary with the cultural context and the desirability of expressing pro-black attitudes."

A further complication is the race of the person who asks the questions. Talking to a white interviewer, blacks or whites are more likely to say that they are supporting the white candidate; talking to a black interviewer, people are more likely to support the black candidate. This holds true whether the surveys are in person, or on the phone.

It could be that people worry about offending the interviewer by suggesting, "I wouldn't vote for someone like you." Or, researchers suggest, talking to a black polltaker who sounds energetic or professional might prime positive images of blacks, overwhelming any negative stereotypes.

The trouble is, "We don't know that doing white-on-white interviews and black-on-black interviews would be more accurate," said Jon Krosnick, a professor of psychology and political science at Stanford. "It is possible that right now the social norms within the African-American community are such that if you're going to vote for McCain, it's too embarrassing to admit, and if you're not going to vote at all, it's almost as embarrassing."

The question of how race affects polling is of course different from the question of how it affects the vote. Many experts argue that race does not play a huge role in either this year, because the economy has emerged as such a dominant issue, and Mr. Obama is not primarily identified by his race.

But most of what they know, they know from polls. And even in the least complicated years, polling is a recipe with a good dash of “Who knows?”

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November 14, 2008, 5:25 pm

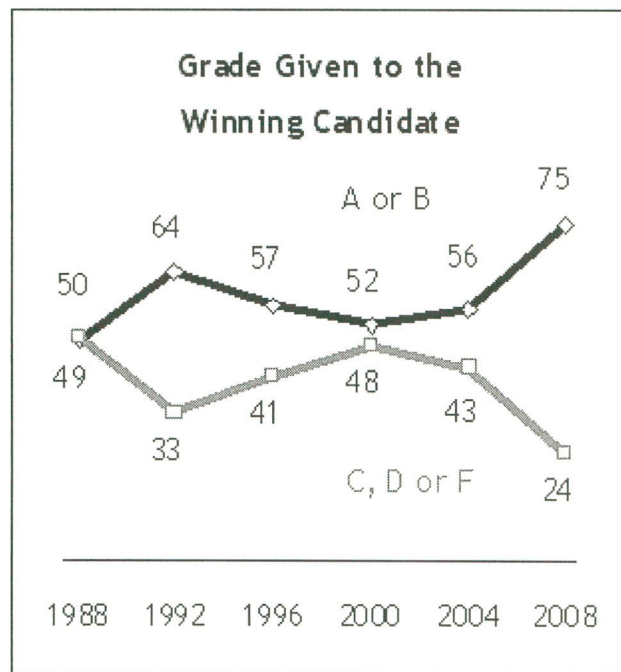
High Hopes

By Andrew Kohut

Andrew Kohut is the president of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (Full biography.)

Barack Obama won only 53 percent of the vote on Election Day, but he is getting a landslide greeting from the American public. Indeed, recent polls by Gallup and the Pew Research Center find the public exuberant about Mr. Obama and optimistic that he will solve the nation's problems.

A Pew post-election poll taken last weekend finds the voters giving Mr. Obama better grades for his conduct during the campaign than any presidential candidate since 1988. Seventy-five percent of the sample gave Mr. Obama a grade of A or B grade for his performance, while 24 percent gave him a C, D or F.



Source: Pew Research Center

The Gallup Poll also showed Mr. Obama getting a higher post-election favorable rating (68 percent) than either George W. Bush in 2000 (56 percent) or Bill Clinton in 1992 (60 percent).

Looking ahead, Pew found 67 percent of its national sample of voters saying they thought that Mr. Obama would have a successful first term, as many as 39 percent of those voters supported John McCain. The Gallup Poll asked a broader question about the state of the

country four years from now, but found a similar result: 65 percent said the country will be better off. In comparison, only 50 percent thought the country would be better off following George W. Bush's victory in 2000, and about the same number (51 percent) thought the country would be better off following Bill Clinton's success in 1992.

When Gallup asked about specific problems confronting the new administration, it found majorities saying they expected the new administration to succeed in dealing with 13 of 16 problem areas they tested. Notably large numbers expected that Mr. Obama will increase respect for the United States abroad; improve education, the environment and conditions for minorities and the poor; create a strong economic recovery; and succeed in getting troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan in a way that is "not harmful" to the United States.

The polls also showed the public anticipating a better political environment as well. The Pew survey showed somewhat more voters thinking relations between Republicans and Democrats in Washington would improve under Mr. Obama compared with a survey following the 2006 mid-term election (37 percent versus 29 percent). And Gallup found as many as 80 percent of its respondents thinking that Mr. Obama will make a sincere effort to work with Republicans to find solutions.

Of course, the higher expectations for his presidency are probably a function of the current public concern about the state of the nation. But at least some of that hope has to do with the president-elect emerging from a tough and often negative campaign with his image intact, if not enhanced.

Voters' Feelings About Obama

	March 2008*	Nov 2008	Diff
All voters	%	%	
Hopeful	54	69	+15
Proud	42	65	+23
Uneasy	38	35	-3
Angry	26	9	-17
Republicans			
Hopeful	30	38	+8
Proud	21	37	+16
Uneasy	62	68	+6
Angry	37	17	-20
Democrats			
Hopeful	72	96	+24
Proud	60	92	+32
Uneasy	25	7	-18
Angry	18	2	-16
Independents			
Hopeful	55	68	+13
Proud	39	60	+21
Uneasy	39	36	-3
Angry	26	8	-18

* Based on registered voters.

Source: Pew Research Center

The Pew survey found Mr. Obama eliciting far more positive reaction from voters than he did prior to the general election campaign. Sixty-five percent of voters now say Mr. Obama makes them feel proud, up from 42 percent in March. Voters were also much more likely to say the president-elect makes them feel hopeful (69 percent versus 54 percent in March).

And that positive response is not confined to Democrats. Considerably more Republican voters now say Mr. Obama makes them feel proud and hopeful, and many fewer say Mr. Obama makes them angry (17 percent now versus 37 percent in March.)

This is all good news for the new administration. Mr. Obama may have a sweeter and longer honeymoon than most new presidents, but given the problems he confronts he'll need it. Most Americans expect him to repair the economy, deal successfully with the wars and make progress on key domestic issues.

How long will impatient Americans be hopeful about Mr. Obama as he struggles to deal with the many problems he inherits? That may be the important political question of 2009. Barack Obama will have to summon all of his extraordinary ability to connect and communicate with American citizens to buy himself the time he needs to solve the huge problems that he will confront on Jan. 21.

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