

The Obama Effect: Race, Gender, and Children's Presidential Selections

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Abstract

Past research has shown that children are aware of racism and sexism among American presidents with girls showing a preference for a female president. Due to the re-election of a non-Caucasian president and the presence of a visible female candidate, it was hypothesized that non-Caucasian children would prefer non-Caucasian presidential candidates, and that girls would show a greater preference for female candidates. Twenty-four children selected the person they thought could be president from photographs of randomly arranged adult faces representing gender and racial diversity. Girls were more likely to choose a female president and non-Caucasian children were more likely to choose a non-Caucasian president.



In the past decade, the United States has experienced many political firsts. The first African American, Barack Obama, and the first woman, Hillary Clinton ran for president. Will the introduction of race and gender in politics impact the way voters examine prospective candidates? Research on the effects of race and gender on presidential preferences showed that women increased their engagement in politics when they saw a strong competitive female candidate in the mix (Atkeson, 2003) and that enhanced electoral support was given to non-Caucasian candidates by non-Caucasian voters (Kaufmann, 2003).

Although much research has looked at the different influences that affect adolescent and adult political choice, not a lot has been done on children. Yet, children have been found to have a consistent political orientation (van Deth, Abendschon & Vollmar, 2011). In addition, Brown, Alabi, Huynh, and Masten (2011) found that children have both a gender and ethnic bias. Fridkin and Kenney (2007) found that boys and girls differed in their political party preferences with boys more likely to side with the Republican Party and girls with the Democratic Party. Moreover, Neff et al. (2007) found that most children perceive men to hold more power in politics, and young children overall think that men are more dominant than women. Bigler, Arthur, Hughes, and Patterson (2008) studied children's awareness of ethnic and gender difference among past presidents and their attributions for the lack of female, African American, and Latino presidents. They found that most children were aware of ethnic and gender differences and attributed the lack of female, African American, and Latino presidents to gender and racial discrimination. However, regardless of their race and gender, they also found that 61% of children would actually like to be president when they get older. Additionally, 86% of children said that both Caucasians and African Americans can be president, but the majority of children acknowledged that Caucasians are usually presidents. Children were aware of how gender, ethnicity, and race affected the selection of the United States President before the election of the first African American president.

With the reelection of President Obama in 2012, and with Hillary Clinton serving as a visible female presidential candidate in 2008, this study sought to investigate whether children have certain racial and gender preferences in terms of political leaders. Will children begin to change the discrimination in the U.S. political system by becoming less biased than previous generations?



Hypotheses

Because more women are running for high political offices and can serve as role models for girls, it was hypothesized that girls would be more likely than boys to prefer a female candidate. Secondly, with a non-Caucasian president in office as a role model, it was hypothesized that non-Caucasian children would prefer non-Caucasian presidential candidates.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 24 children (10 boys, 14 girls) between the ages of 7-9 (*Mage* = 8.29) drawn from a small private elementary school in northern California. The ethnic backgrounds represented included: 70.8% Caucasian, 4.2% African American, and 25% Latino. Children whose parents signed parental consent forms were selected as participants, and the children signaled their additional consent when asked if they would like to look at some pictures.

Materials

Materials consisted of the Presidential Choice Survey which contained questions about presidential characteristics and presidential knowledge. Also, pictures of possible presidential candidates were used. The pictures were of four male and four female adults of Caucasian, African American, Latino, or Asian descent.

Procedure

Children were randomly assigned to one of three interviewers and individually interviewed using the Presidential Choices Survey. All three interviewers were female undergraduates of similar ethnic background. After the interview, the children were thanked for their participation and escorted back to their classrooms.

Results

The hypothesis that girls would be more likely to choose a female president than boys was examined and supported using a Pearson Chi-Square Test, $\chi^2(1) = 4.03, p = .05$. Figure 1 represents the presidential choices of participants by gender. The second hypothesis that non-Caucasian children would be more likely to choose a non-Caucasian president than the Caucasian children was also supported ($\chi^2(1) = 4.20, p = .040$). Figure 2 represents the presidential choices of our participants by ethnicity. Further, significantly more non-Caucasian children than Caucasian children said they could be president someday ($\chi^2(1) = 5.04, p = .03$). See Figure 3.

Discussion

As predicted, girls were more likely to choose a female president than were boys. These results can be understood in the light of the research by Carter (2009) which found that women had less traditional gender role attitudes than men. Also, these results are consistent with past research which noted that girls are more likely to prefer the Democratic Party while boys are more likely to prefer the Republican Party (Fridkin & Kenney, 2007). Since girls are more likely to prefer the Democratic Party, this may indicate that they prefer non-traditional political values. Consequently, girls may be more willing to choose a female president because they want to see a change in the traditional presidential candidates. They may hope for a change in the norm so that they too can run for president one day.

Our second hypothesis that non-Caucasian children would prefer a non-Caucasian president over a Caucasian president was also supported, confirming research by Kaufmann (2003) who found enhanced electoral support among non-Caucasians for a non-Caucasian political candidate. As non-Caucasian children were more likely to answer yes to the question, "could you be president?" it may be that they are demonstrating a shift in the acceptance of other ethnicities as presidential candidates. Very likely the inauguration of President Obama may have caused this increase in ethnic acceptance in non-Caucasian children.

The current study yielded some unexpected challenges. The Presidential Choice Survey proved problematic by asking many open ended questions, which led to numerous "I don't know" responses from many of the children participating. Further, the potential candidates' attire, the candidates' age, and the non-standard photograph backgrounds could have influenced the subjects' selections.

Future research might lead to a better understanding of what facilitates children's preferences of political candidates. Research could include expanding the age range of the children to see if all ages have similar preferences. Comparisons of racial and gender biases between the United States and other countries could also be researched. Despite the limitations of this study, it is clear that preference between race and gender is significant. Children are starting to move away from previous stereotypical patterns of the past. While it appears that these biases are still present, things may begin to change. Having the first African-American president in office has opened the door for boys and girls of all ethnicities to the possibility that they too can be president someday.

