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Analysis: Impact of Personal Characteristics on Candidate Support

Americans most comfortable voting for a black or female candidate

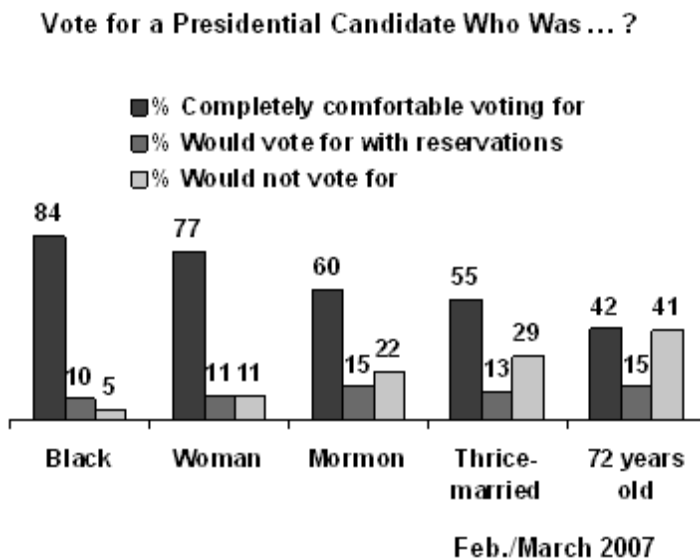
by Frank Newport and Joseph Carroll

GALLUP NEWS SERVICE

PRINCETON, NJ -- A great deal of attention has been paid to the personal characteristics of potential presidential candidates and the impact of these traits on the candidates' chances of winning the White House. These considerations are particularly interesting this year because the various potential candidates have a wide variety of traits heretofore not seen in a U.S. president: a woman (Hillary Clinton), a Mormon (Mitt Romney), a black person (Barack Obama), someone 72 years old (John McCain), and thrice-married (Rudy Giuliani, Newt Gingrich). Three of these five characteristics describe potential Republican candidates (Mormon, aged 72, thrice-married), while two describe potential Democratic candidates (woman, black).

For many years, Gallup polls have tracked the public's views on electing a female or a black president. This year, Gallup has updated the public's reactions to race and gender, and added in other of the traits listed above. (See Related Items for more details).

The basic pattern of reactions to the five key traits are as followed, based on an aggregated sample involving a total of over 2,000 interviews conducted in two surveys (Feb. 9-11, 2007 and March 2-4, 2007).



Of significant interest is the relationship between specific subgroups of the U.S. population, based on demographic and political variables, and reactions to these presidential candidate characteristics. There is a natural interest, for example, in the question of whether or not women are more or less likely than men to support a female president. Are older Americans more accepting of an older president? And what are Republicans' reactions to the traits specific to Republican candidates?

The following tables -- based on the combined samples as described above -- illustrate how different groups of Americans feel about voting for presidential candidates of different backgrounds. In all instances, the question wording described the candidate as one who was an "otherwise well-qualified candidate" nominated by the person's party but who happened to be [characteristic]. The results show not only the percentages of who would vote for the described candidate and who would not, but also the results of a follow-up question that separated those who said they would vote for a candidate into those who would feel "completely comfortable" and those who would vote, but "with reservations." Each table is followed by a listing of key points.

**Vote for Female Presidential Candidate?
Feb.-Mar. 2007**

	Completely comfortable voting for	Would vote for, with reservations	Total Would vote for	Would not vote for
	%	%	%	%
Gender				
Men	78	11	89	11
Women	76	12	88	11
Age				
18-29	76	15	91	9
30-49	82	9	91	8
50-64	79	11	90	9
65 and older	66	13	79	20
Gender and Age				
Men, aged 18-49	80	10	90	9

Men, aged 50 and older	75	11	86	13
Women, aged 18-49	81	11	92	8
Women, aged 50 and older	71	13	84	15

Party Affiliation

Republicans	64	15	79	20
Independents	78	13	91	8
Democrats	86	7	93	7

Party Affiliation and Ideology

Conservative Republicans	60	16	76	22
Moderate/liberal Republicans	76	11	87	12
Pure independents	74	15	89	9
Conservative Democrats	78	12	90	9
Moderate Democrats	85	7	92	7
Liberal Democrats	90	8	98	2

Religious Preference

White Protestant/Other Christian	70	13	83	17
All Catholics	78	13	91	8
All other religions	84	13	97	3
All with no religion	87	10	97	3

Church Attendance

Weekly/Nearly weekly	70	13	83	16
Monthly	79	10	89	11
Seldom/Never	84	10	94	6

Key Points About Voting for a Female Presidential Candidate

There is no gender gap in these perceptions. Men and women are equally likely to say they would be willing to vote for a woman for president.

Senior citizens are less likely than those who are younger to support a female presidential candidate. Only 79% of adults aged 65 and older say they would vote for a woman for president, significantly below the sample average.

Republicans are less likely than are independents or Democrats to say they would vote for a woman. This partisan variation could reflect Republicans' specific thoughts about a Hillary Clinton candidacy, even though the question was only asked in a generic sense, mentioning no candidate names and specifying the candidate was of the person's own party.

Religious preference plays a role in views of supporting a woman for president, with white Protestants and other Christians less likely than those in other religions to support a woman for president. These groups are disproportionately likely to be Republicans.

Vote for Mormon Presidential Candidate?, Feb.-Mar. 2007

Completely comfortable voting for	Would vote for, with reservations	Total Would vote for	Would not vote for
%	%	%	%

Gender

Men	65	13	78	20
Women	55	16	71	23
Age				
18-29	62	16	78	18
30-49	61	14	75	21
50-64	60	16	76	20
65 and older	54	14	68	27
Gender and Age				
Men, aged 18-49	65	13	78	19
Men, aged 50 and older	64	13	77	21
Women, aged 18-49	58	16	74	22
Women, aged 50 and older	52	17	69	25
Party Affiliation				
Republicans	59	12	71	25
Independents	64	14	78	20
Democrats	55	19	74	21

Party Affiliation and Ideology

Conservative Republicans	61	11	72	24
Moderate/liberal Republicans	63	12	75	23
Pure independents	64	12	76	21
Conservative Democrats	51	19	70	26
Moderate Democrats	60	18	78	17
Liberal Democrats	60	17	77	23

Religious Preference

White Protestant/Other Christian	57	14	71	26
All Catholics	66	14	80	15
All other religions	73	10	83	15
All with no religion	64	14	78	19

Church Attendance

Weekly/Nearly weekly	56	14	70	27
Monthly	62	12	74	22
Seldom/Never	64	15	79	16

Key Points About Voting for a Mormon Presidential Candidate

There are only slight variations in willingness to vote for a Mormon for president by partisanship, with 71% of Republicans, 78% of independents, and 74% of Democrats saying they would be completely comfortable voting for a Mormon.

White Protestants and other Christians are less likely than Catholics, those who prefer other religions, and those with no religious affiliation to vote for a Mormon for president, though a majority of all groups say they would vote for a Mormon. Also, Americans who attend religious services weekly or almost weekly are less likely than those who go to church less frequently to support a Mormon candidate.

Vote for 72-Year-Old Presidential Candidate? Feb.-Mar. 2007

	Completely comfortable voting for	Would vote for, with reservations	Total Would vote for	Would not vote for
	%	%	%	%
Gender				
Men	48	14	62	36
Women	36	16	52	46
Age				
18-29	38	20	58	40
30-49	46	16	62	37
50-64	42	11	53	44
65 and older	38	12	50	46
Gender and Age				
Men, aged 18-49	49	15	64	34

Men, aged 50 and older	48	12	60	38
Women, aged 18-49	39	20	59	41
Women, aged 50 and older	34	12	46	51

Party Affiliation

Republicans	47	15	62	37
Independents	43	15	58	40
Democrats	37	15	52	45

Party Affiliation and Ideology

Conservative Republicans	49	16	65	33
Moderate/liberal Republicans	45	16	61	38
Pure independents	49	10	59	36
Conservative Democrats	41	11	52	48
Moderate Democrats	33	14	47	50
Liberal Democrats	39	17	56	42

Religious Preference

White Protestant/Other Christian	43	14	57	41
All Catholics	38	17	55	42
All other religions	58	12	70	28
All with no religion	44	20	64	35

Church Attendance

Weekly/Nearly weekly	42	14	56	43
Monthly	39	14	53	46
Seldom/Never	43	16	59	38

Key Points About Voting for a 72-Year-Old Presidential Candidate

There are not, as might be expected, significant variations by age in these perceptions. Senior citizens are no more likely to say they would vote for a 72-year-old candidate than those who are younger. In fact, those 65 and older are slightly more likely to say that they would not vote for a 72-year-old candidate than is the case for those who are under 50.

Perhaps due to the fact that Republican candidate John McCain would be 72 years old at the time of the next election, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say they would vote for a presidential candidate that is 72.

Just 44% of blacks say they would vote for a 72-year-old candidate, which is lower than the 59% among whites.

**Vote for Presidential Candidate Who Has Been Married Three Times?
Feb.-Mar. 2007**

	Completely comfortable voting for	Would vote for, with reservations	Total Would vote for	Would not vote for
	%	%	%	%
Gender				
Men	62	11	73	25

Women	48	15	63	33
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Age

18-29	58	13	71	28
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30-49	58	15	73	25
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50-64	54	13	67	29
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65 and older	49	9	58	37
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Gender and Age

Men, aged 18-49	63	11	74	24
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Men, aged 50 and older	61	11	72	26
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Women, aged 18-49	52	18	70	28
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Women, aged 50 and older	44	12	56	38
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Party Affiliation

Republicans	53	14	67	29
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Independents	54	15	69	29
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Democrats	58	10	68	29
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Party Affiliation and Ideology

Conservative Republicans	45	17	62	34
Moderate/liberal Republicans	63	11	74	25
Pure independents	49	21	70	27
Conservative Democrats	55	8	63	32
Moderate Democrats	58	11	69	28
Liberal Democrats	61	11	72	27
Religious Preference				
White Protestant/Other Christian	52	13	65	32
All Catholics	51	15	66	29
All other religions	56	16	72	26
All with no religion	70	15	85	14
Church Attendance				
Weekly/Nearly weekly	47	12	59	37
Monthly	57	11	68	29
Seldom/Never	62	14	76	22

Key Points About Voting for a Thrice-Married Presidential Candidate

Conservatives of either party are slightly less likely to support a thrice-married candidate than moderate or liberal members of the same party. However, a majority of all political and ideological groups say they would vote for a thrice-married candidate.

There is a relationship between church-going frequency and willingness to support a candidate who has been married three times. The more frequently Americans report going to church, the less likely they say they are to vote for a candidate who has been married three times.

Men are more likely than women to support a thrice-married presidential candidate.

Americans 65 and older are less likely than those under 65 to say they would support a candidate for president who has been married three times.

**Vote for Black Presidential Candidate?
Feb.-Mar. 2007**

	Completely comfortable voting for	Would vote for, with reservations	Total Would vote for	Would not vote for
	%	%	%	%
Gender				
Men	84	9	93	6
Women	85	10	95	5
Age				
18-29	90	7	97	2
30-49	88	8	96	4
50-64	85	8	93	6
65 and older	72	17	89	10
Gender and Age				
Men, aged 18-49	87	8	95	4
Men, aged 50 and older	80	10	90	9

Women, aged 18-49	90	8	98	2
Women, aged 50 and older	79	13	92	7
Party Affiliation				
Republicans	83	10	93	6
Independents	84	10	94	5
Democrats	85	9	94	5
Party Affiliation and Ideology				
Conservative Republicans	81	11	92	6
Moderate/liberal Republicans	86	9	95	4
Pure independents	78	11	89	9
Conservative Democrats	77	16	93	7
Moderate Democrats	85	9	94	5
Liberal Democrats	92	4	96	4
Religious Preference				
White Protestant/Other Christian	83	9	92	7

All Catholics	83	11	94	4
All other religions	91	7	98	2
All with no religion	89	7	96	3

Church Attendance

Weekly/Nearly weekly	83	10	93	6
Monthly	82	10	92	8
Seldom/Never	86	9	95	4

Race

Whites	84	9	93	6
Blacks*	83	13	96	4

* = Low sample size

Key Points About Voting for a Black Presidential Candidate

Although the sample size of blacks in this aggregate sample is low (N=125), these data give no indication of a major difference between blacks and whites in their expressed willingness to vote for a black candidate.

More generally, there are few meaningful differences across any of the subgroups included in this analysis in expressed willingness to vote for a black candidate. The only exception is among Americans 65 and older, who are slightly less likely to indicate willingness to vote for a black candidate at all, and more likely to express reservations about voting for a black candidate.

Bottom Line

As has been widely discussed, these initial reactions to the characteristics of generic presidential candidates are not necessarily predictive of actual voting behavior. A voter may object in principle to voting for a Mormon, or a 72-year-old candidate, but the specific positives of an actual candidate who has these traits may override initial objections. However, what is interesting in the data reviewed here are the fascinating interrelationships between the characteristics of the voters and views on the impact of the characteristics of the candidates. One might expect that voters who share the characteristic under discussion would be more likely to vote for that type of candidate. But in several instances reviewed above, that's not the case. Blacks are no more likely than whites to say they would vote for a black candidate, women are no more likely than men to say they would vote for a female candidate, and older Americans are no more likely than those who are younger to say they would vote for a 72-year-old candidate.

There are also important political implications. Some observers have argued that a candidate like Rudy Giuliani or Newt Gingrich -- each married three times -- would have difficulty gaining the vote of conservative Republicans. These data, however, indicate that a majority of all subgroups would be willing to vote for such a candidate.

Survey Methods

Results are based on telephone interviews with 2,016 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted Feb. 9-11, 2007 and March 2-4, 2007. For results based on the total sample of national adults, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 2 percentage points. The maximum margin of sampling error for each individual subgroup presented in the tables above varies depending on the sample size involved, but is always higher than the sampling error for the total sample. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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