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How to Talk about White People

By [John Hartigan](#)

When Hillary Clinton blurted out her comment about "working, hard-working Americans, white Americans," in an interview on Wednesday, she was trying to articulate a substantive point regarding the Democratic nomination process. What people heard instead was a desperate candidate bluntly playing the "race card." Her remarks, though, are an example of how difficult it is for Americans to talk about race, even in the midst of an election year when race is so clearly a factor.

Clinton may or may not be right that working-class whites provide her "a much broader base to build a winning coalition," or about their relative importance to the Democrats' chances of winning in November. But the topic is worth discussing, especially in light of the large number of whites yet to vote in the West Virginia and Kentucky primaries. Polls indicate that Clinton might garner victories by 30-point margins in each state. Even if the outcomes do not alter the Democrats' race, how white Appalachians vote certainly matters both to the November election and to our understanding of how race matters.

But will votes for Clinton in these primaries be cast on the basis of race, or class, or religion, or regional affiliation? Clinton's remarks present an opportunity to address the question, but the stern rebuke she drew from pundits -- and their assumption that Barack Obama has the nomination locked up -- instead forecloses further discussion. We know that race matters in this campaign from exit polls in which one in five voters say so. But does it matter more to working-class whites than other forms of identity? We don't know, because the surveys are not designed to answer this question but also because race is being treated more as a matter of etiquette than of open discussion.

Journalists covering the primaries in January characterized Bill Clinton's "fairy tale" remark as "injecting" race in to the campaign, as if this was an illicit or improper development. This mistakenly implies that race was not already an aspect of the campaign -- how could it not be? -- or that it should not be part of the discussion. Journalists are vigilant on this point because we have a long history of "race-baiting" in our elections. But we have to differentiate between race as a subtext -- as in the notorious Willie Horton ads -- and race as an explicit subject of discussion. The first is treacherous;

the second is necessary. This vigilance may well have created a larger problem than it solves.

Geraldine Ferraro is a good example. Her role in Clinton's campaign ended after she remarked, "If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position." Her assertion is debatable, but it generated little debate, largely because it was quickly repudiated by Clinton herself. However gratifying it may be to see such views denounced, consider the cost. Banishing people from the public sphere satisfies a sense of propriety, but it also makes it more difficult to talk about race. That is because people fear the high price for saying "something wrong," forestalling an open discussion of what was "wrong" about what Ferraro said.

That leaves us ill-adapted for the work we need to do -- to talk about how and why race matters without contributing further to the polarization that it often entails.

Racial identification is not static. These are identities inscribed on us at birth, but how we -- and those around us -- think about and act on those identities can vary and change. Obama won the white male vote in Maryland, Virginia and Wisconsin, but lost it in Ohio, Texas and Pennsylvania. Why? Racism is an easy answer, but just assuming it gets us no closer to understanding what may prompt whites to identify racially in one situation and not in another.

Despite our "national conversation on race," discussions about the elections so far suggest that we still are not very good at talking about race in public. The strictures justifiably developed to ward off racist speech work today more like cultural taboos that make people inarticulate about race -- even someone as articulate as Clinton. But the deeper problem is that we are not sure yet how to talk about white people. We have yet to settle on how to speak about whiteness -- how to identify its privileges and powers, as well as its vulnerability. We will only improve at this if we take better advantage of the opportunity Clinton's remarks present.

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