

# The “Obama Effect” and the Question of *Political Mobility*

By Stephen Blair Venable

Since the election of Barack Obama in 2008, we have witnessed a marked increase in the number of black candidates running for elective office – a phenomenon often referred to as the “Obama Effect.” In the lead-up to this 2014 midterm election, the numbers speak for themselves:

- There are more than 100 black candidates nationwide on the ballot in statewide and congressional elections. (This is the highest number of blacks running for elective office dating all the way back to Reconstruction.)
- At least 83 black candidates are running for the U.S. House. (The previous record of 72 was set in 2012.)
- Five black women are expected to win their respective elections for the U.S. House: (1) Bonnie Watson Coleman in New Jersey, (2) Brenda Lawrence in Michigan, (3) Alma Adams in North Carolina, (4) Stacey Plaskett in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and (5) Mia Love in Utah (who expects to become the first black Republican woman elected to Congress). If we assume for a moment that all four of these women win, as expected, and that none of the black females who are currently running as incumbents lose, we would end up with a record 20 black women in the U.S. House.
- At least 25 black candidates are running for statewide offices – a record.

But so far, the massive increase in the number of black candidates across the country who have run for elective office since Barack Obama’s election in 2008 has not translated into more of them winning the top offices (i.e., the U.S. House, the U.S. Senate, and state governorships). A look at the actual numbers (prior to the upcoming 2014 election results) can cause a bit of cognitive dissonance:

- U.S. Senate – When Barack Obama was inaugurated in 2009, there were no elected black U.S. senators. There is one today – Cory Booker of New Jersey.
- U.S. House of Representatives - Between 2008-2012, the number of blacks elected to the U.S. House rose from 39 to 42 – a somewhat less than significant change.
- State Governorships - When Barack Obama took office in 2009, we had only one elected black governor – Deval Patrick of Massachusetts. He is still the only elected black governor today. (He is also only the second elected black governor since Reconstruction).

While it is reported that black candidates are doing better across the country on the local level, most black candidates seem to be stuck at that level of the political landscape. Indeed, access to the top elective offices appears, for some reason, to simply be out of their reach. Why might that be? I don't know the answer to this question, but I have a few thoughts on the subject that might help us get a meaningful conversation started.

In my view, one of the most pressing issues of our time is the lack of social mobility in the U.S. Indeed, in the land of opportunity, one's socio-economic status is still most accurately predicted by the socio-economic status of one's parents (one's father, in particular). Irrespective of one's individual ability and personal choices, one is quite unlikely, statistically speaking, to rise from the lower class to the upper class in one's lifetime. This is one of the many hallmarks of our class society.

The majority of black politicians, like black citizens, somehow seem to get "pooled at the bottom" for a plethora of powerful socio-historical reasons. This phenomenon gets played out in every facet of our society. When Tiger Woods won the Masters in 1997 in record fashion, the number of black Americans playing recreational golf increased exponentially – something that many referred to at that time as the "Tiger Woods Effect." But interestingly, there has been no increase in blacks playing at the P.G.A. Tour level. The vast majority of black golfers have pooled at the bottom as they do in almost every facet of American life.

What we do know is that it appears to be harder for black candidates, on average, to be successful at fundraising than it is for white candidates. And of course, lack of access to capital is an insurmountable hurdle to millions of black would-be entrepreneurs, prospective homeowners, prospective purchasers of a college education for their kids, etc. Is it time to have a national conversation about *political mobility* as well as social mobility?

In the end, however, the "Obama Effect" is real – not only because it led black voters to vote at higher rates in 2012 than white voters (the only time in U.S. history that this happened), but as I have said before, because it has led millions of black citizens and so many black candidates to begin to "meaningfully engage in the art of the possible." In the current context of a struggling economy, widening income inequality, low social mobility, and the pervasive so-called "achievement gap," a little inspiration can go a long way...and that is really where all great things begin.