

New York Times

February 24, 2008, 7:54 pm

In November, Will Age Matter?

By Andrew Kohut

As John McCain comes ever closer to securing the Republican nomination, his age has remained notably absent as a campaign issue. So far it has attracted so little attention that the network exit pollsters have not included even one question on the subject in 23 state surveys — an extraordinary occurrence given that Senator McCain would be the oldest man ever to take office, if he were to win the presidency.

Other polling data exists, however, that strongly suggests that the Arizona senator's age could become a big issue for him in the general campaign. Add to this, of course, Bob Dole's unsuccessful 1996 presidential campaign where his age — he turned 73 during the summer of that year — was very much on the minds of many American voters.

The polling in this campaign shows that while some voters may be reluctant to admit that they will not cast a ballot for a black or a woman, larger numbers are not at all shy about voicing reservations about voting for an older presidential candidate.

Chart: Reactions to Personal Qualities of Presidential Candidates
Source: Pew Research Center

A 2007 Pew poll, which tested the desirability of 23 personal characteristics for presidential candidates, found 48 percent of its respondents saying that they would be less likely to vote for candidates in their 70's. This was about the same percentage who said they were disinclined to vote for a presidential candidate who was a Muslim or a former drug user. Only atheists and candidates who had never held elective office engendered more negative responses.

By way of comparison at the other end of the spectrum, just 4 percent said they would be less likely to vote for a black candidate and 11 percent for a woman. The survey also showed that while older candidates set off alarm bells, younger candidates were a draw for many voters. Almost one in five voters (18 percent) said they would be more likely to vote for presidential candidates who are in their 40's and only 8 percent said less likely.

Pew's poll was taken at the very beginning of the campaign, but nonetheless it found that the word "old" was among the frequently used words to describe John McCain. And if this were to increase, it might well cost him votes. As many as 60 percent of respondents who said they had no problems with older candidates said they might vote for Senator McCain, if he were a candidate for president. But fewer (50 percent) of those with age concerns said they might back him.

In 1996, Republican candidate Bob Dole struggled with age in the November general election. In CBS polls, more than one third of voters consistently said that his age would be an obstacle to his being an effective president. But the public was divided over whether lack of stamina or being out of touch was the greater concern.

Incidents along the campaign trail may have reinforced the perception that Bob Dole had an age problem — in particular, his fall from a stage at a campaign event in September 1996. Indeed, Pew surveys at the time found as many as 36 percent of voters saying they had closely followed news of this incident. Furthermore, the surveys suggest that the feeling among the public that Mr. Dole was too old increased during the course of the campaign. A Los Angeles Times survey in April 1996 found 34 percent of respondents saying that Bob Dole was too old; four months later that number had climbed to 42 percent.

Throughout the campaign, Bill Clinton bested Mr. Dole in survey tests as the candidate with new ideas. Inasmuch as Mr. Clinton had the disadvantage in terms of “newness” of being the incumbent, this response likely reflected the age gap. Bob Dole’s strong association with the ideas of another era may have been intensified by his portrayal as a hero of World War II, which ended before the average 40-year-old voter was born. There might be a parallel here with John McCain, hero of Vietnam, a distant war for the average voter today.

A new Pew survey that only questioned Republicans about Senator McCain’s age found 19 percent of G.O.P. voters saying they thought he was too old for the job, which was about the percentage of Republicans in 1996 who saw Dole that way, according to Los Angeles Times surveys.

Nonetheless, at this point, John McCain is polling very well against both Senators Clinton and Obama because he’s seen as a different kind of Republican and has strong appeal among independent voters. But whether — and how — voters consider his age when they cast their ballots next November could turn out to be a decisive factor in the presidential election.