

Viva the Vital

How Boomers Transformed Race Relations in America

By Matt Thornhill

In early June, when it became apparent that Barack Obama was going to get the Democratic Party nomination, CBS News fielded a survey among registered voters. One question was “How much of a factor is race in your vote?”

Nearly eight in 10 voters said race was “not important.” Only one in five said it was “one of many factors.” Just a handful identified it as the “most important factor.”

HOW MUCH OF A FACTOR IS RACE IN YOUR VOTE?

(Among registered voters)

	Total	Whites	Blacks
Most important factor	2%	2%	3%
One of many factors	20	20	21
Not important	77	78	76

Source: CBS News, June 2008

In another question, nine of 10 voters - whites and blacks - said they were “glad an African-American has been a serious contender for president.”

That’s stunning. It suggests that when it comes to race in America, there already has been tremendous change. We Boomers certainly live in a different America today than that of our parents. The way we see it, Boomers have been the generational pivot point for race relations in this country. Through us, the issue of race has been transformed forever for the better.

Raised by a generation who genuinely believed blacks were not the equal of whites, most Boomers have raised a generation who see the color of one’s skin as simply an attribute, like hair color or eye color. A major study on racial attitudes by Pew Research last year found that whites, blacks and Hispanics all have generally favorable opinions of one another and all tend to see inter-group relations in a more positive than negative light. These days most young Americans view “black” not as an adjective, like “black person,” but as a descriptor or feature - “the person with the black skin.”

As observers of generational behavior, we can tell you it’s quite a feat for a single generation to not just reject the status quo but create a new one. Let’s examine what happened and why.

A Pivotal Point in History

Most demographers agree that the experiences one has during their “coming of age” years, approximately between the ages of 10 and 20, are the ones that shape and form a generational world view. Boomers came of age from the mid-1950s through the 1970s, when the nation evolved from enforcing Jim Crow laws to delighting in *The Jeffersons*. Young, impressionable, coming-of-age Boomers watched as their parents’

generation first resisted Civil Rights, then enacted it into law. They heard their parents or other adults refer to blacks as “colored” or “negroes” and other, less polite terms. But they also saw sit-ins on TV, or read about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They knew something was changing, but more than likely didn’t think too long or hard about how it ultimately could impact them. At that age, they were sponges, absorbing it all.

Back then, the authority figures in the lives of most Boomers were their Greatest Generation parents, white or black. As such, Dad’s opinion was the *de facto* standard for the entire house. If Dad was in World War II, then he likely knew the Army treated black soldiers as second class citizens. If Dad went to college, he likely attended an all white or an all black school. If blacks worked with Dad, they likely had menial jobs and rarely had authority over whites. Whether spoken or not, Dad - whether white or black - likely held the view that blacks were in some manner not equal to whites. And so did the rest of the house.

The unraveling of that view gained momentum when the Civil Rights Act became law in 1964. Then the watershed year of 1968 ushered the first Boomers out of college into young adulthood. Wide-eyed Boomers learned of Dr. King’s assassination, watched Tommie Smith and John Carlos raise black-gloved fists during the *Star Spangled Banner* at the Mexico City Olympics, and were surprised when *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* won an Oscar for best screenplay. They attended integrated schools, ate at integrated restaurants and rode on integrated buses.

Changes in attitudes and behaviors came slowly, though. It wasn’t until 1971 when the Associated Press decided to modify their annual *Stylebook* on usage and replace “negroes” with “blacks” when referring to African-Americans. In 1972, my own family saw our white neighbors try to ban together to buy our house before we sold it to a black family, despite equal housing laws restricting such tactics.

All of these events, experienced by Boomers during their “Wonder Bread” years, essentially offset the strong views most likely held by their parents. No wonder there was a Generation Gap.

The Next Generation

In the 1980s and 1990s, Boomers became parents. In most cases, both worked and shared in the responsibilities of raising the children. Those young, impressionable Generation X, and then Millennial Generation, children have come of age during a period of diversity and equality. Our society evolved, and became more open and accepting of anyone with talent, smarts, and skills, regardless of race, creed or color. Think of the evolution of Hollywood’s leading men over the last four decades: Paul Newman to Robert Redford to Tom Hanks to Denzel Washington to Will Smith. Ask a young person today why they like Will Smith and we bet there will be no mention of his skin color. Same with LeBron James or Tiger Woods.

That’s because Boomer parents raised Gen X and Millennial children to be much more accepting of different genders, races, religions and sexual orientations. It’s likely many Boomers have raised their children in homes where race wasn’t even an issue open for discussion or debate. Making race a non-issue meant most young Americans are now virtually color blind.

Not long ago a relative shared a story about her son, John, peering out the back window at age 6 and asking about “the black man” getting the garbage can. She looked out and saw four African-Americans around the truck and asked John “What do you mean by ‘the black man?’” while thinking they are all “black men.”

“The man with the black shirt,” John replied.

To him, and many of his generation, one aspect of Dr. King’s dream has been realized. This generation doesn’t “judge based on the color of their skin” because they don’t even see skin color as a distinctive feature, and certainly not the defining feature.

Race and the Presidential Race

This transformation by Boomers, from a racially divisive upbringing to raising a generation all about diversity, is not universal. There are still Boomers, and younger people, who have race issues. Thankfully they themselves are the minority these days.

For the rest of us, let’s keep moving the discussion towards the content of one’s character. And keep race on the sideline of this presidential race.