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RIGHT PEOPLE, WRONG QUESTION

Gloria Steinem

Even before Barrack Obama and Hillary Clinton threw their exploratory committees into the ring, every reporter seemed to be asking which candidate are Americans people more ready for, a white woman or a black man?

With all due respect to the journalistic dilemma of reporting two "firsts" at the same time - two visible presidential candidates who aren't the usual white faces over collars and ties - I think this is a dumb and destructive question.

It's dumb because most Americans are smart enough to figure out that a member of a group may or may not represent its interests. After all, many African-Americans opposed the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme court in 1991 because they were aware of his record - and the views of his conservative supporters.

Similarly, most women weren't excited about Elizabeth Dole as a presidential candidate for the 2000 election because she seemed more attached to those in power than those in need of it. Indeed, Elizabeth dole even got support from people who opposed women making their own reproductive decisions. (If Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice decides to run for president, I imagine that she would face the same fate.)

The question is also destructive because it's divisive. In fact, women of all races and men of color - who together form an underrepresented majority of this country - have often found themselves in coalition. Both opposed the wars in Vietnam and Iraq more and earlier than their white male counterparts. White women have also been more likely than white men to support pro-equality candidates of color, and people of color have been more likely to support pro-equality white women.

It's way too early to know which candidate will earn trust or survive swift—boating, but forcing a choice between race and sex only conceals what's really going on.

So far, for example, polls show that about 60 percent of African-American Democrats support Hillary Clinton, while only about 20 percent support Barrack Obama. These surprising numbers probably have less to do with Senator Obama himself than with whether people feel he's been around long enough to trust, whether the name "Clinton," with its association of racial inclusiveness, is a better bet,

and whether a member of one's own group - a group that has endured a history of discrimination - could win anyway.

This disease of doubt plays a big role:

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81 percent of black voters tell pollsters that a white man will get the Democratic nomination, while only 58 percent of white voters do. Such doubt also helps to explain why women are more likely than men to support Hillary Clinton, but also more likely to say she can't win.

Still, the larger question is: Why compare allies and ignore the opposition?

Both Senators Clinton and Obama are civil rights advocates, feminists, environmentalists and critics of the war in Iraq, though she voted early and wrong, and he spoke out early and right. Both have resisted pandering to the right, something that sets them apart from any Republican candidate, including John McCain. Both have Washington and foreign policy experience, George W. Bush did not when he first ran for president.

But the greatest reason for progressives to refuse to be drawn into an irrelevant debate about Clinton and Obama is that it is destructive. We can accomplish more if we act as a coalition.

Think, for instance, of the powerful 19th-century coalition for universal adult suffrage. The parallels between being a chattel slave by race and chattel as a wife, daughter or indentured worker turned abolitionists into suffrages, and vice versa. This coalition against a caste system based on race and sex turned the country on its head - until it was divided by giving the vote to its smallest part, Negro men.

Sojourner Truth famously warned that this division would cripple the movement for decades to come - and it did. Only a half-century later did white and black women get the vote, by then tarnished by the racist rhetoric of some white women and diminished by racist restrictions and violence at pools. And only decades after that, in the 1960s, did the civil rights movement start a new wave of equality that spread into feminism, the Native American movement, the gay and lesbian movement and much more.

But those activists were reinventing the wheel. They were rediscovering Gunnar Myrdal's verdict of the 1940s that "the parallel between women and Negroes is the deepest truth of American life, for together they form the unpaid or underpaid labor on which America runs."

This time, we could learn from history. We could double our chances by working for one of these candidates, not against the other. For now, I've figured out how to answer reporters when they ask if I'm supporting Hilary Clinton or Barack Obama.

I just say yes. ■

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