

Perspectives on Obama: America's View of Gender, Masculinity, and Family

By

Anja Cziommer, Björn Hundhausen,
Pardis Mohadessi and Bridgit Nelezen

Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Demographics
- General Opinion Questions
- The Influence of Obama's Physical Appearance
- Political Issues
- The Obama Family in the Role of the Presidential Family
- Summary & Outlook
- Analyses & Sources

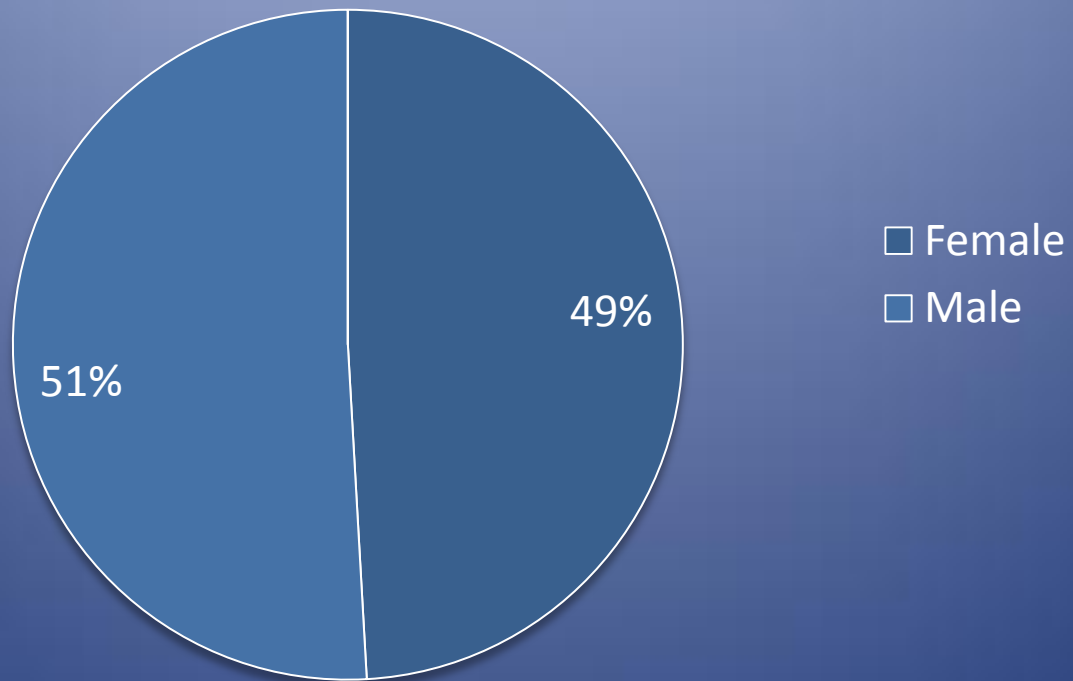
Introduction

In the context of the course “Cultural Meanings of the Obama Presidency”, lively debate often commenced concerning Obama’s campaign promises and actual performance as President of the United States. Another primary focus of our course was to explore the perspectives of US citizens concerning Obama’s race and masculinity, as well as his family life. As many students in our course had conflicting opinions regarding Obama’s performance in comparison to his promises as well as the effects of his race, appearance and family life on his ability to acquire an electorate and subsequently lead a country, our group decided to investigate the attitudes of US citizens concerning these issues. Thus, we conducted an online survey of US citizens in August of 2010. Fifty-three Americans took part in the survey, which was conducted over a period of two weeks. The focus of the survey was to explore the following questions: Do the citizens of the United States believe there is a discrepancy in Obama’s campaign platform and his action’s during his Presidency and has this caused a change in their attitudes towards Obama? How does the American society view Obama in relation to his masculinity, family life and race? In addition to analyzing the general results of the survey, we further explored the responses with respect to the demographic information of the respondents such as gender, age and political orientation and sought to determine whether there were any clear trends or differences among these factors.

The survey was conducted anonymously. Furthermore, an attempt was made to reach a diverse range of individuals; however, as can be seen from the demographics section, it should be noted that diversity was not sufficiently achieved. Therefore, the following survey analysis cannot be considered a representative sample of American society, rather a glimpse of the current attitudes of the American public.

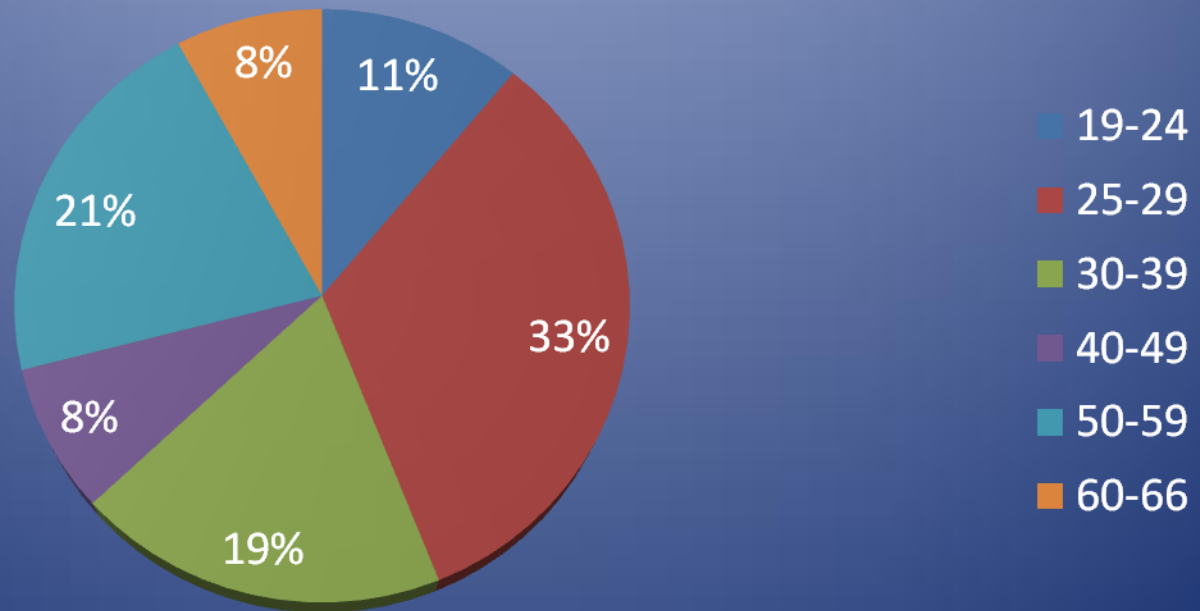
Demographics

1) Gender

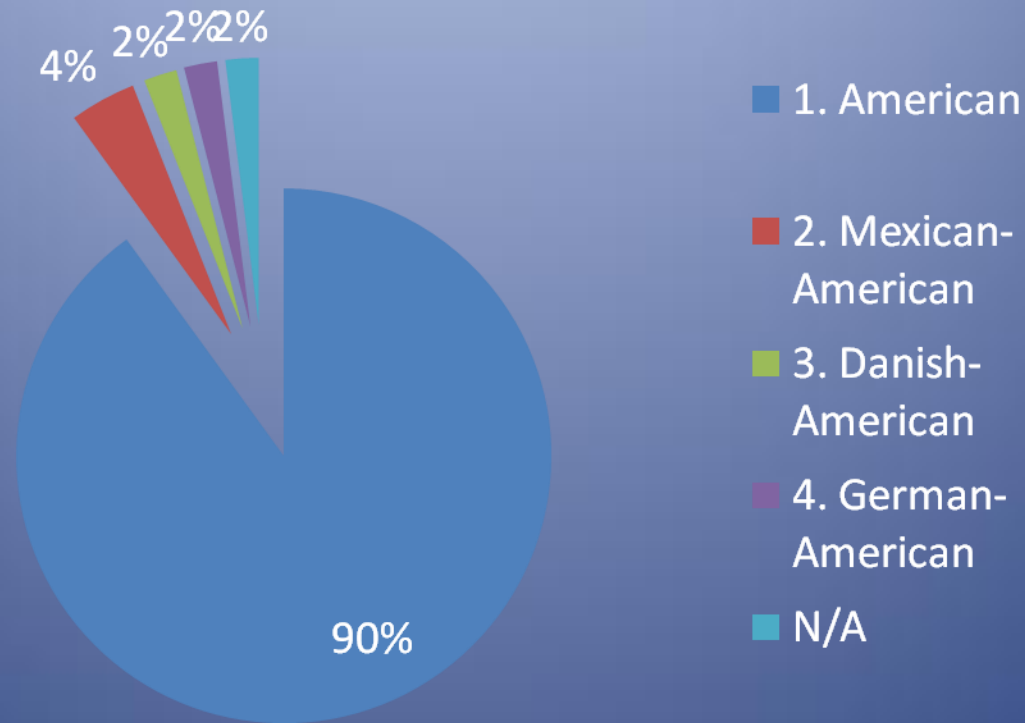


2) Age

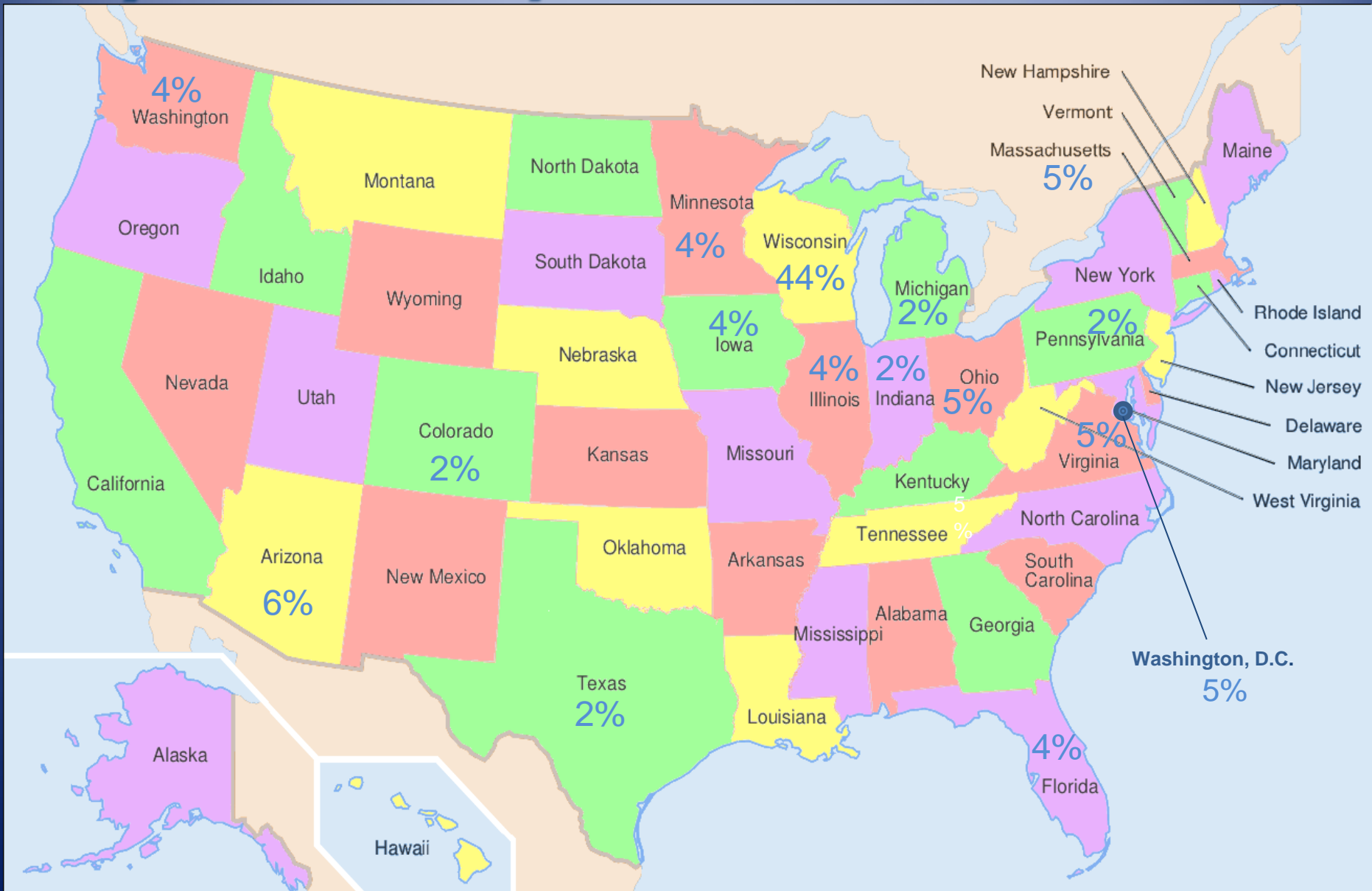
Average Age: 38



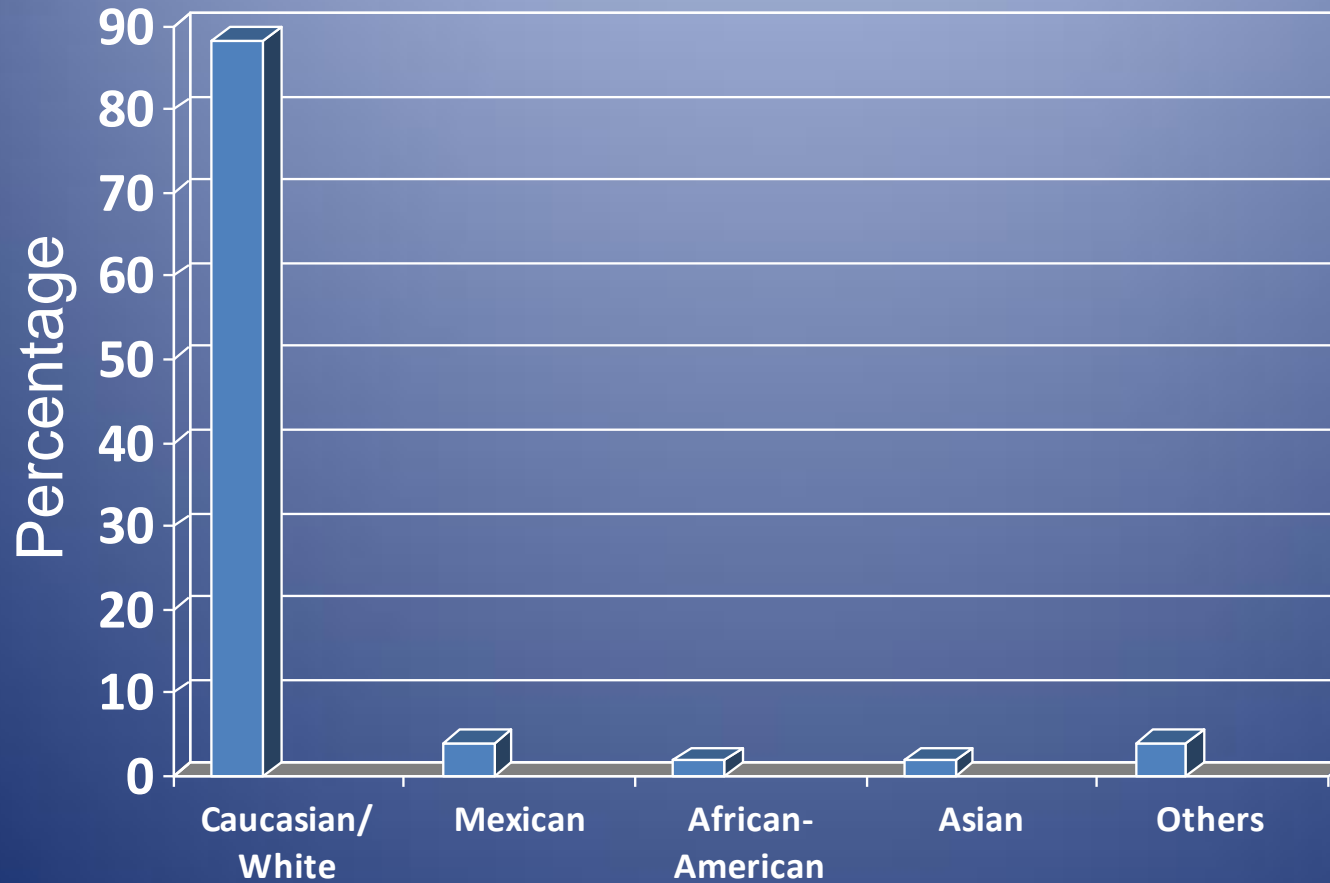
3) Nationality



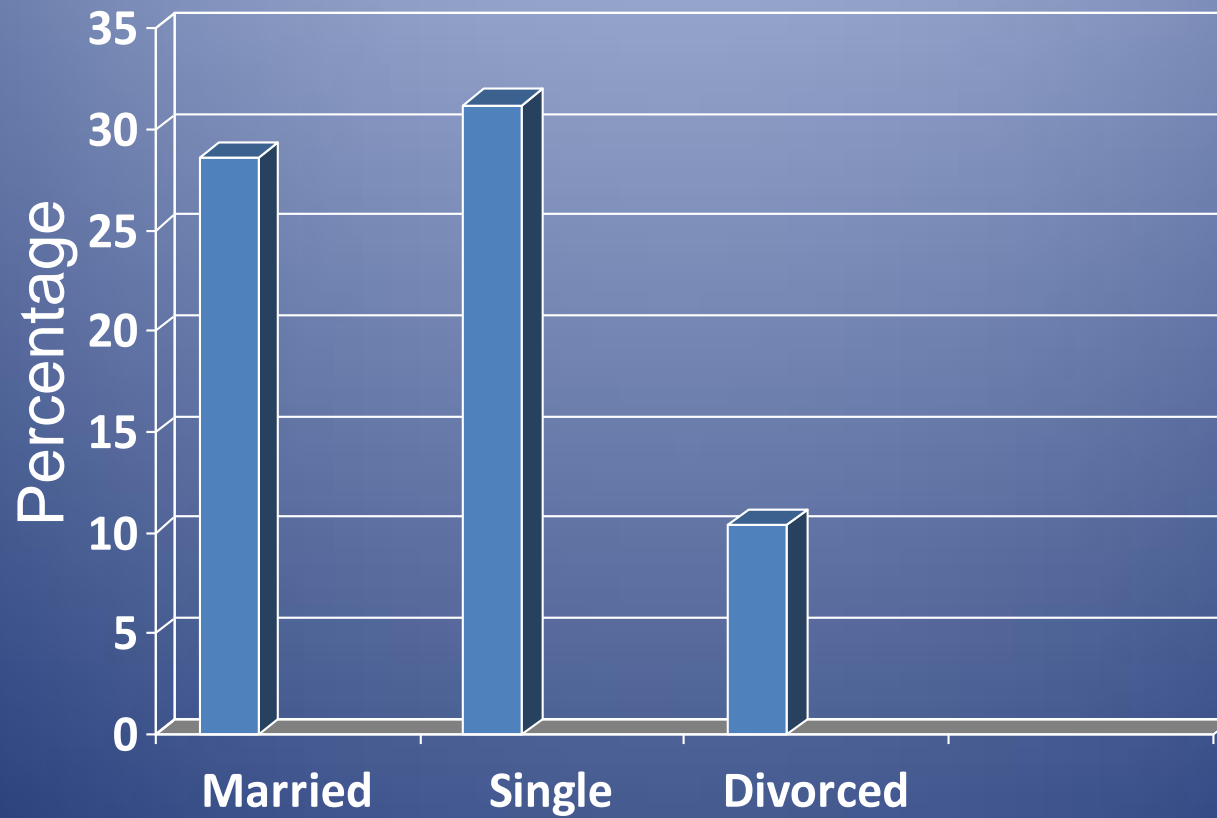
4) Residency



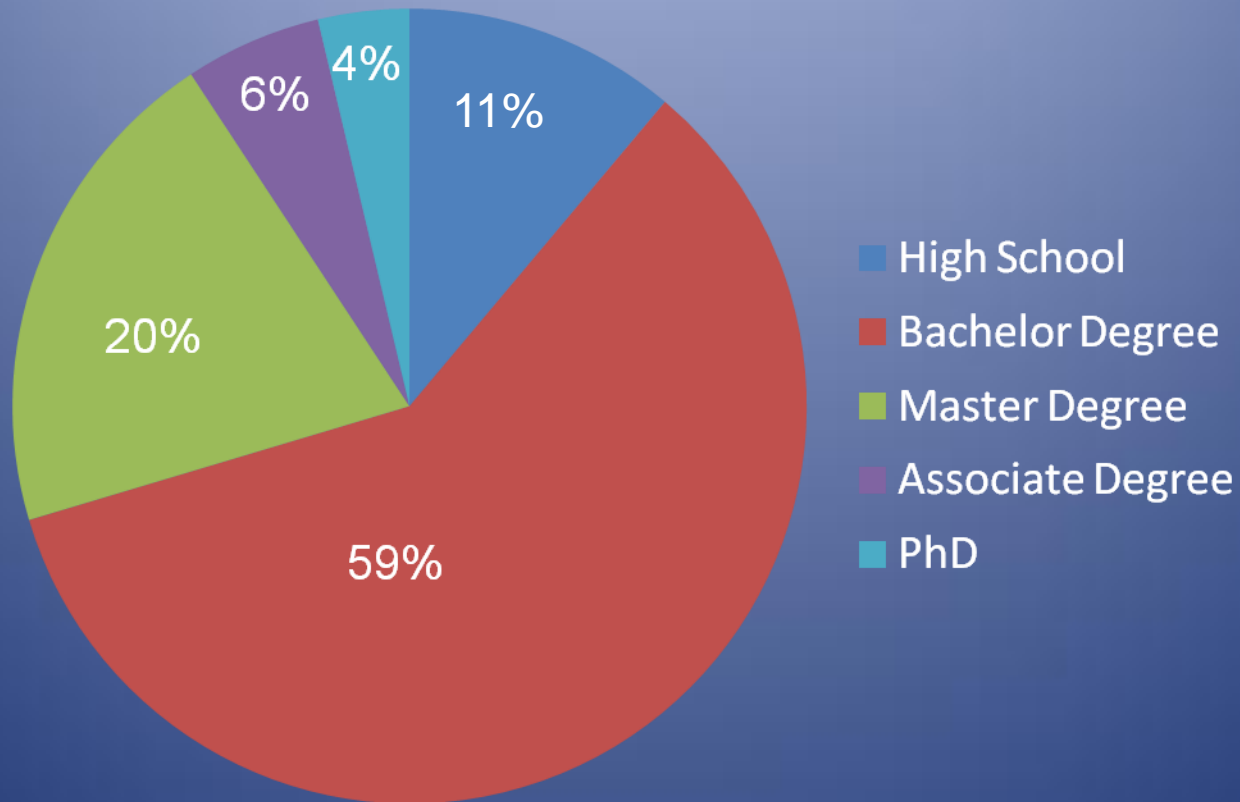
5) Ethnicity



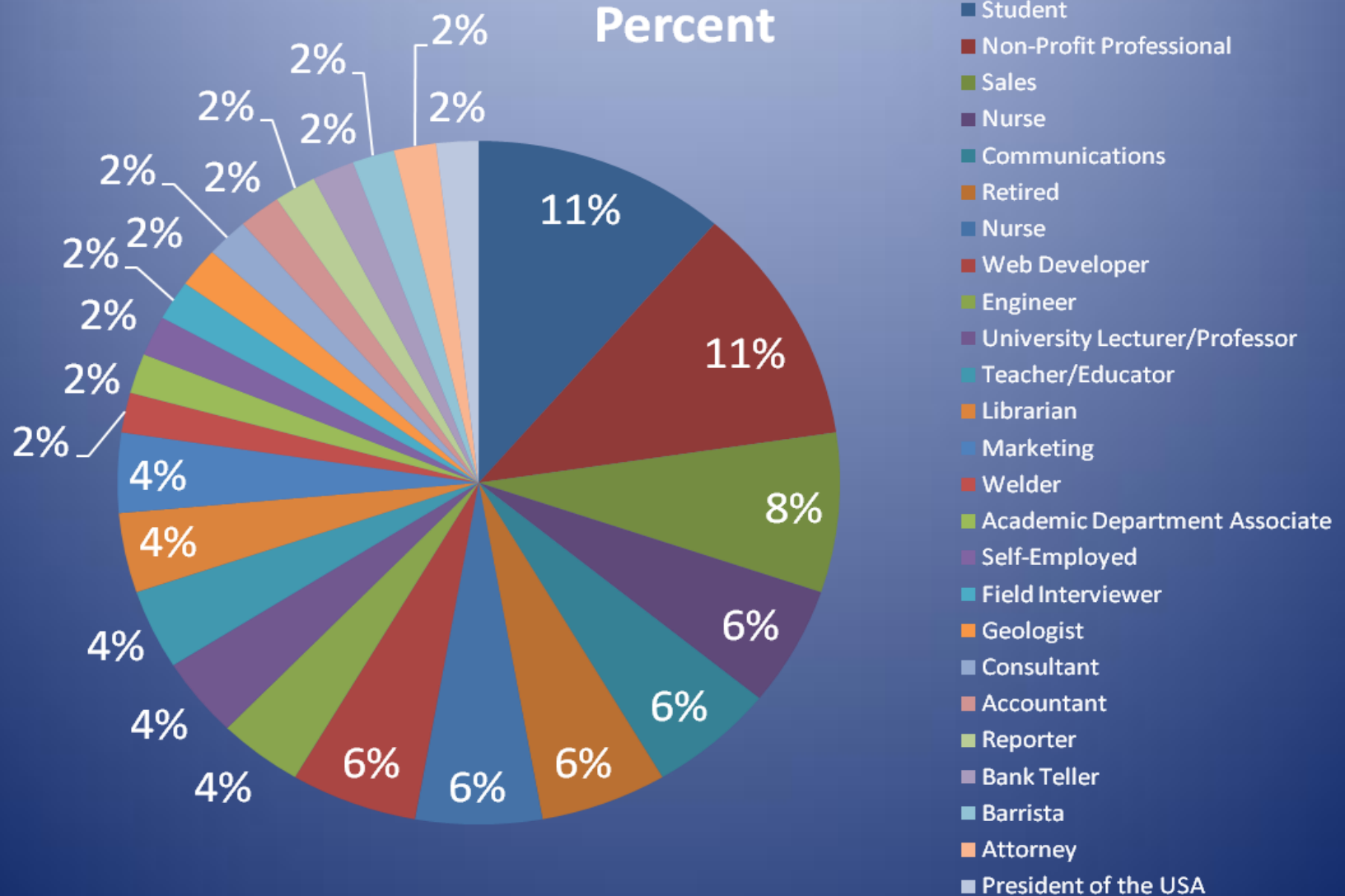
6) Family Status



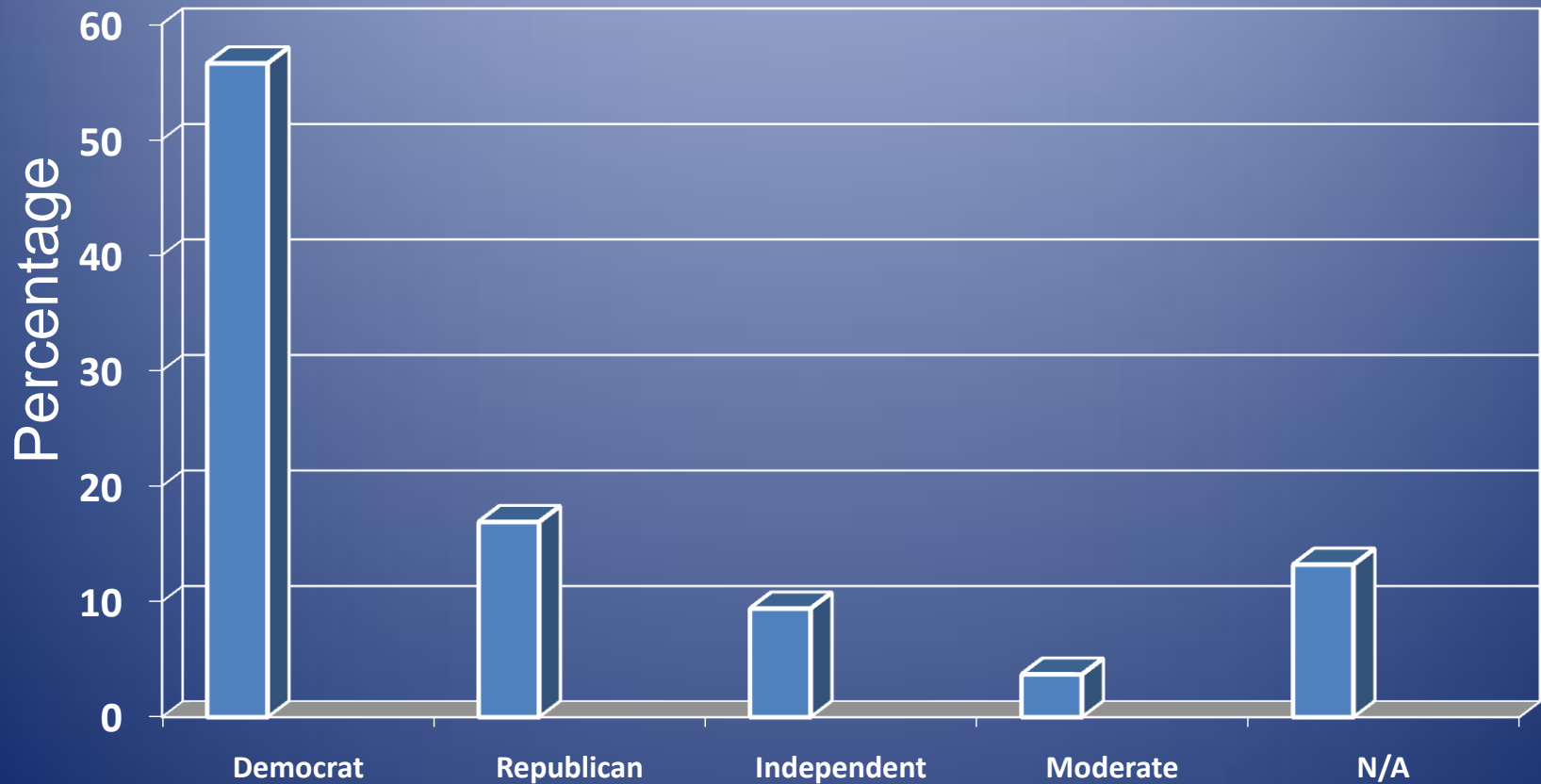
7) Education



8) Occupation



9) Political Orientation



Demographics Summary

A total of 53 people participated in the Obama survey. 49% were male and 51% were female. The average age of the participants was 38. The largest age group represented in the survey was between 25 and 29 years old (33%), whereas the smallest age groups were 40 - 49 years old (8%), and 60 – 66 years old (8%). Concerning nationality, the vast majority of participants were of American nationality (90%). Only a few participants stated that they had Danish, German or Mexican ancestors. It was not possible to have people from every states take part in our survey. Almost half of the participants stated they lived in Wisconsin (44%), while others listed states such as Arizona (6%), Ohio (5%), Virginia (5%), and Washington, DC (5%) as their places of residence.

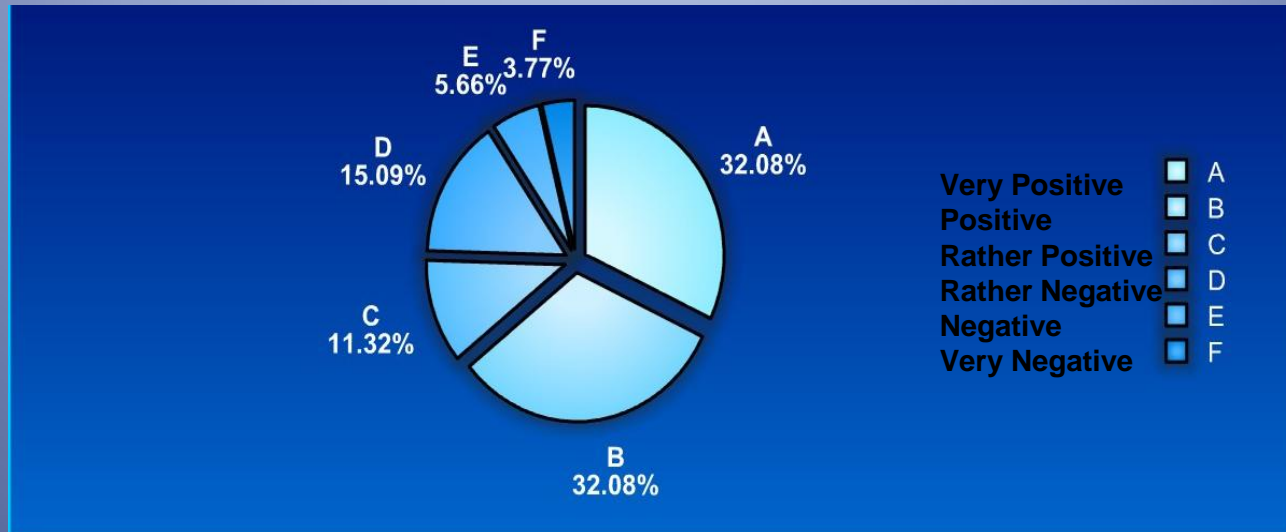
The vast majority of participants listed Caucasian or white (90%) as their ethnicity. 2% were African American, 2% were Asian, and 4% were Mexican. Thus, the results of the survey mainly represent the opinions of white Americans and do not contain a representative view of the USA's rich diversity of minorities. This factor prevented us from being able to analyze the results of the survey with special attention to the ethnic backgrounds of the participants. Concerning family status, approximately one-third of the participants (31% percent) were single, which can be explained by the young age of many of the participants. Strikingly, 83% had at least earned a Bachelor's degree at the time of the survey. Concerning the participants' current occupations, no single field was dominant among the respondents. While non-profit professionals and students each made up for 11% of the respondents, the remaining 78% had a broad diversity of occupations.

Respondents were also asked to state their political orientation. The majority (57%) listed themselves as Democrats, whereas only 17% stated they were Republicans. Political orientation will be addressed throughout the survey analysis to determine whether opinions of Obama differed between people with varying political orientation.

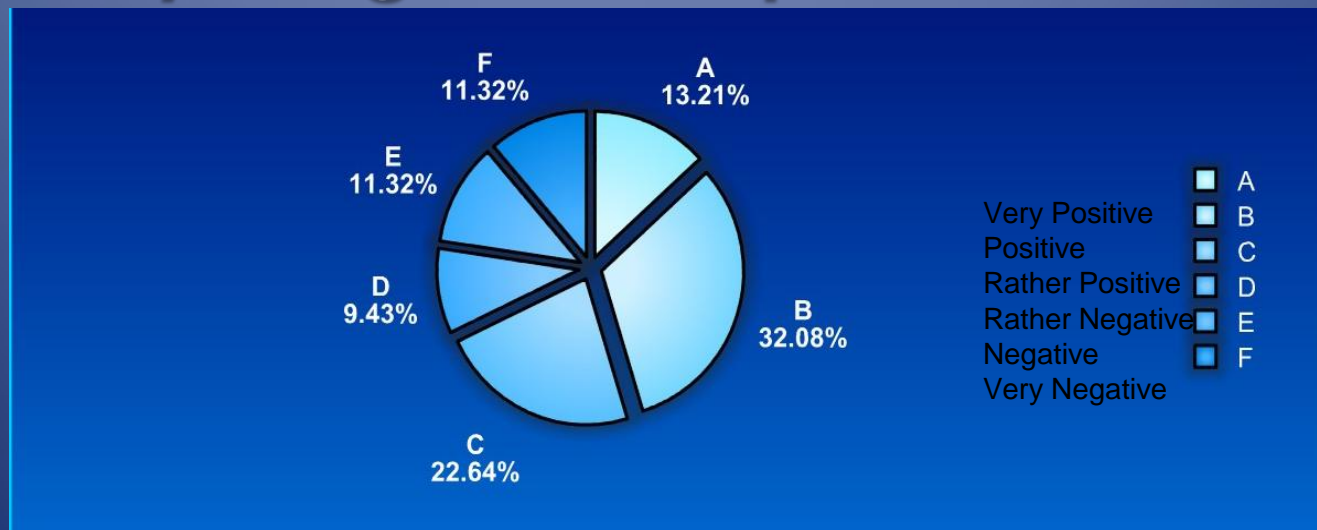
General Opinion Questions



11) What was your general opinion of Obama at the time of his election?



12) What is your general opinion of Obama today?



[For a detailed analysis of these questions, please follow this link](#)

13) Name the first three adjectives* that enter your mind when considering Obama. Election Day vs. Today

Four Most Commonly Used Words

Election Day (November 4th, 2008)

hope/hopeful – 32% (16 times)
intelligent/smart – 20% (10 times)
charismatic – 16% (8 times)
change – 14% (7 times)

- Number of times a **positively connoted** word was given : **108**
- Number of times a **negatively connoted** word was given: **24**
- Ratio of positive to negative: **4.5:1**

Today (August 10-24th, 2010)

hope/hopeful – 16% (8 times)
intelligent/smart – 16%
optimistic – 10%
charismatic – 6%

- Number of times a **positively connoted** word was given : **51**
- Number of times a **negatively connoted** was given: **63**
- Ratio of positive to negative: **1:1.25**

- Total number of words used: 131
- Number of words occurring in both time categories: 25

*Please note that while it was requested of the respondents to give adjectives to describe Obama, many nouns, verbs and phrases were given. These words were also tallied in the survey.

13) Name the first three adjectives that enter your mind when considering Obama.

Election Day vs. Today Cont'd

Complete list of words (in alphabetic order) and their frequency (in number of times given)

(Election Day : Today)

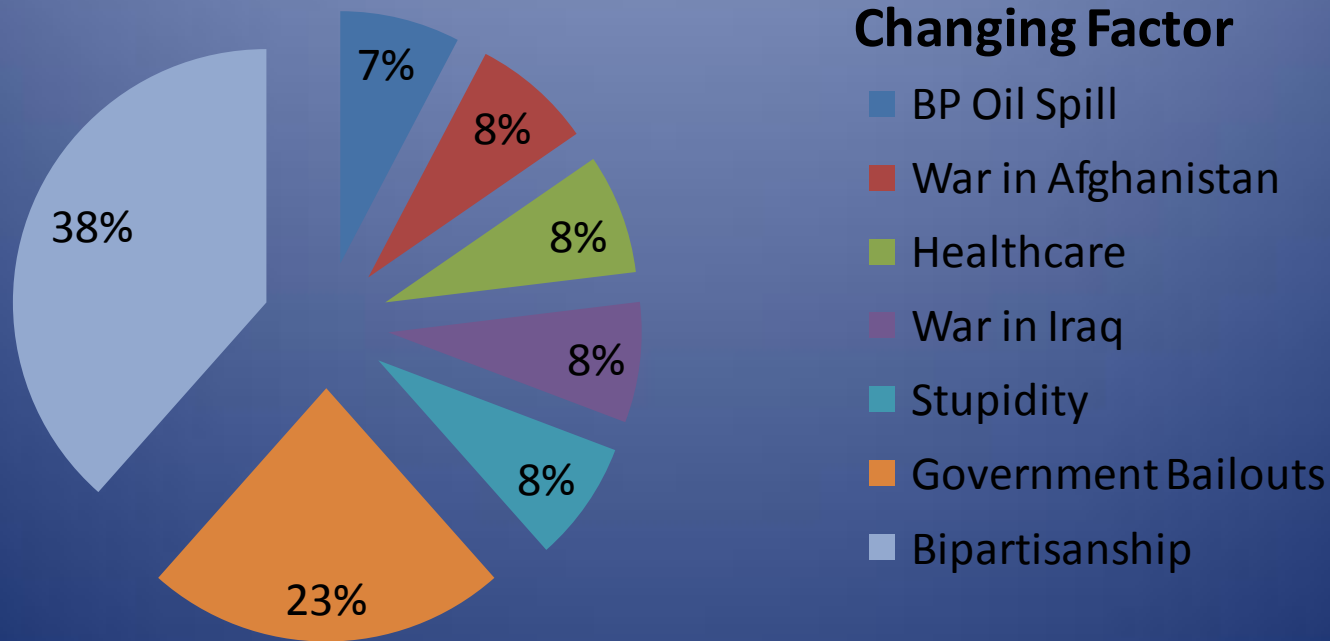
ambitious (1:0), antagonized (0:1), anti-business (0:1), anticipating (1:0), appeasing (1:0), arrogant (1:1), askew (0:1), assertive (0:1), attractive/handsome (2:2), authentic (1:1), belligerent (0:1), bigoted (0:1), black (1:0), cautious (0:1), challenging (0:1), change (7:1), charismatic (8:3), compassionate (0:1), competent (0:2), conscious (1:0), cool (2:1), cynical (0:1), dangerous (0:1), deceit (0:1), decisive (0:2), Democrat (0:1), determined (2:1), different (1:0), dilettante (1:0), disastrous (0:2), disillusioned (0:1), dynamic (3:0), educated (1:0), egoistic (1:1), eloquent (1:0), enthusiastic (1:0), exasperated (0:1), excited (1:0), expectant (0:1), extremist (1:0), fake (1:0), false prophet (1:0), firm (0:1), fresh (6:1), friendly (1:1), frustrated (0:1), generous (0:1), good politician (0:1), guarded (0:1), happy (1:0), hard (0:1), hard-working (0:2), hideous (1:0), honest (3:0), hopeful/hope (16:6), hopeless (0:1), hypocrite (0:1), incompetent (0:1), inconsequent (0:1), inept (0:1), inexperienced (3:0), innovative (1:1), inspiring (1:1), intelligent/smart (10:8), irrational (1:0), irresponsible (0:1), job-killing (0:1), learning (0:1), liar (2:2), liberal (3:2), likeable (1:0), logical (0:1), lost (0:1), misleading (1:0), monotonous (0:1), new (6:0), open (1:0), optimistic (3:5), over-hyped (1:0), overstrained (0:1), patient (0:1), persistent (0:1), phony (1:0), pleasing (0:1), poise (1:0), political (0:1), positive (3:0), powerful (1:0), pragmatic (0:1), pretty (0:1), progressive (3:1), promising (2:1), prosperity (1:0), quiet (0:1), realistic (1:0), regular (0:1), reliable (0:2), resilient (0:1), respected (0:1), savvy (1:0), scary (1:1), self-confident (1:2), serious (0:1), shrewd (0:1), slick (1:0), socialist (1:0), sophisticated (0:1), spender (1:2), spineless (0:1), stalled (0:2), stressed (0:2), strong (4:0), talker (1:0), target-oriented (1:0), terrorist (0:1), tired (0:1), too many plans (1:0), troubled (0:1), trustworthy (1:1), typical (0:1), unconfident (0:2), unprepared (1:0), unrealistic (1:1), untrustworthy (1:0), vision (1:0), weak (0:1), wealthy (0:1), well-spoken (1:0), worn-out (0:1), wrong (0:1)

[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

14) Has your opinion of Obama changed since the 2008 election?



15) If your opinion of Obama has changed, was there a single factor that influenced this change?
If your answer is yes, please explain this factor in a few words:

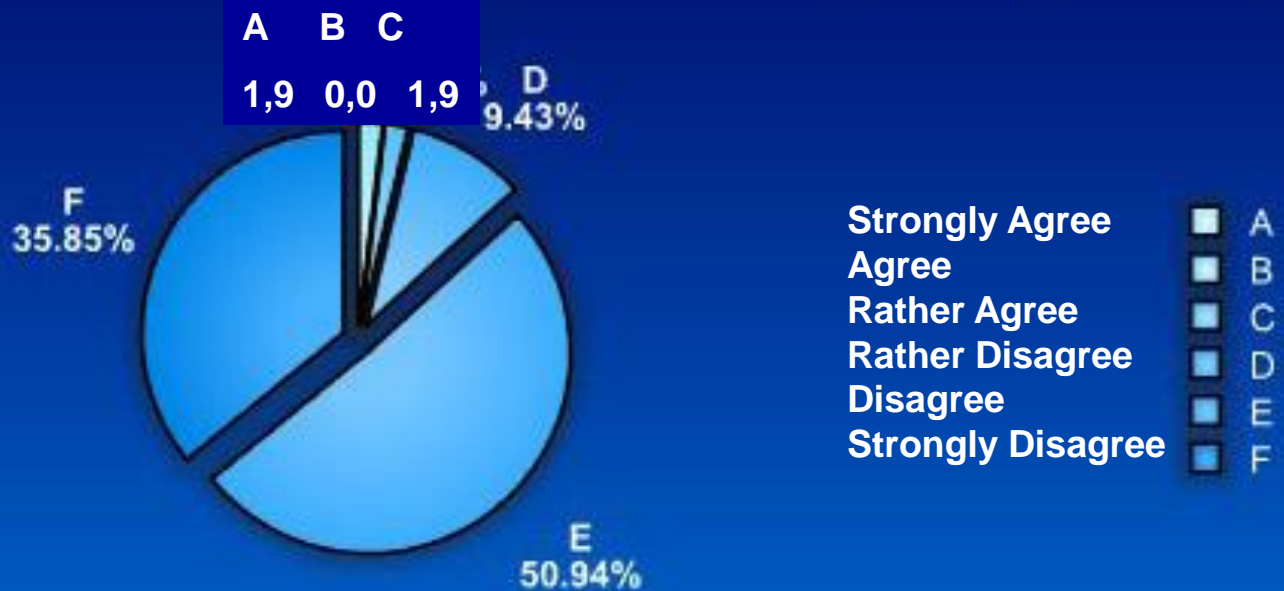


[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

The Influence of Obama's Physical Appearance

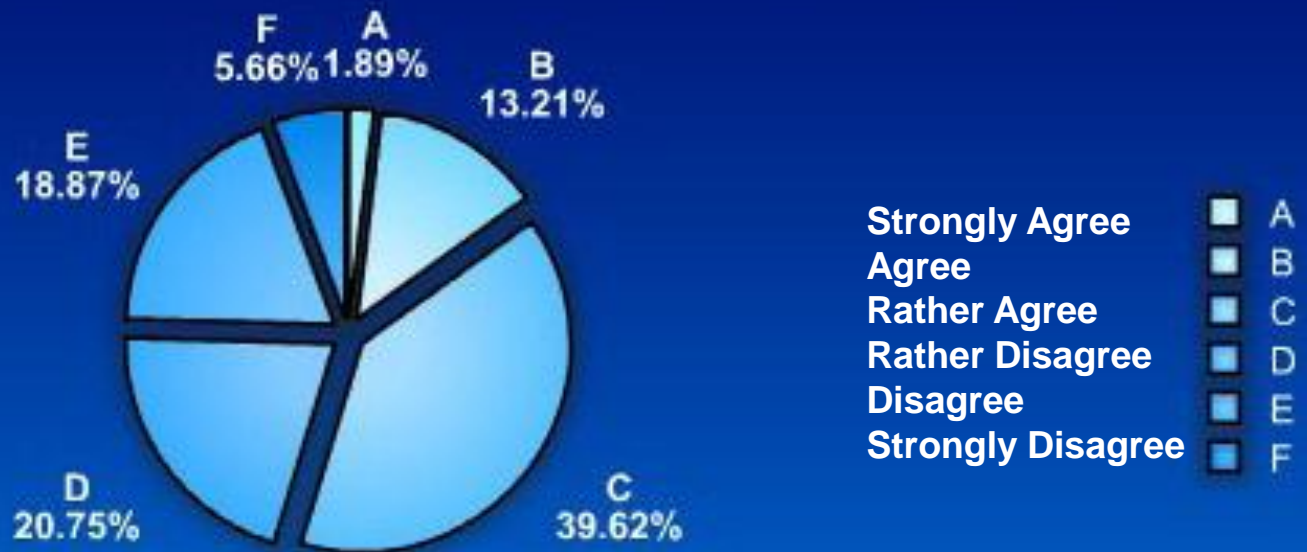


16) I perceived Obama's thin physical appearance (in comparison to former US Presidents) as an obstacle for him being elected President. Do you agree?



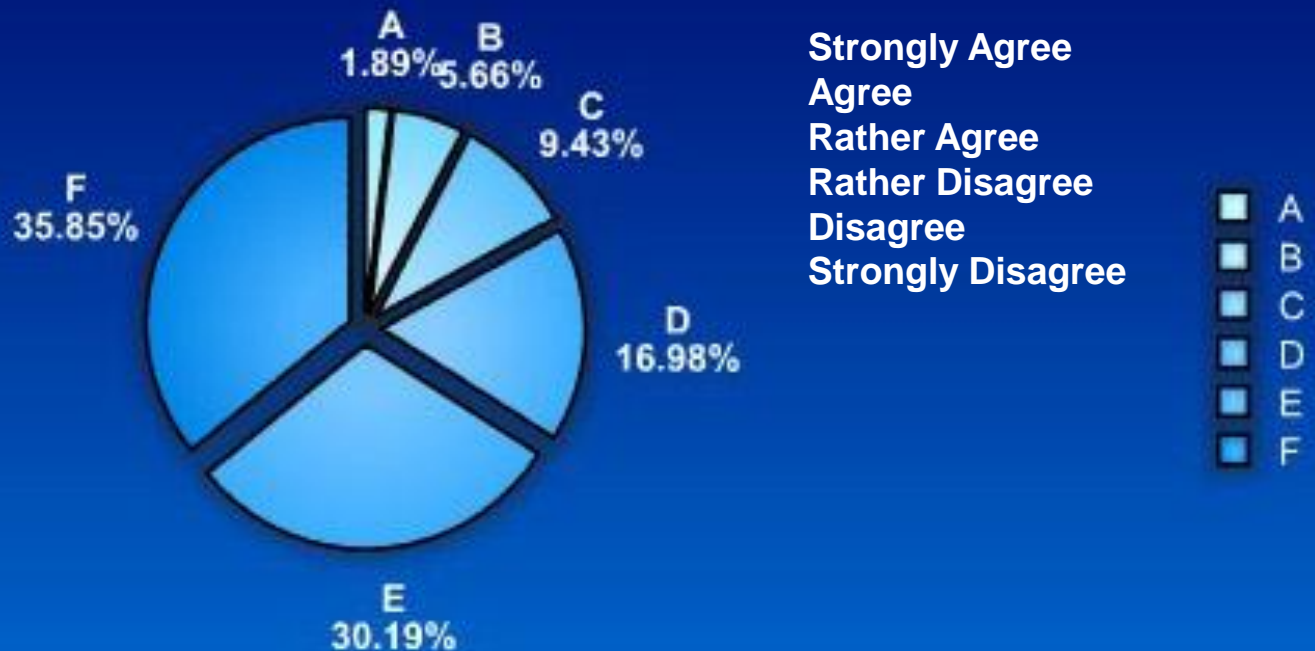
[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

17) I think that Obama's attractiveness, which has been compared to John F. Kennedy's, was one reason for Obama's success. Do you agree?



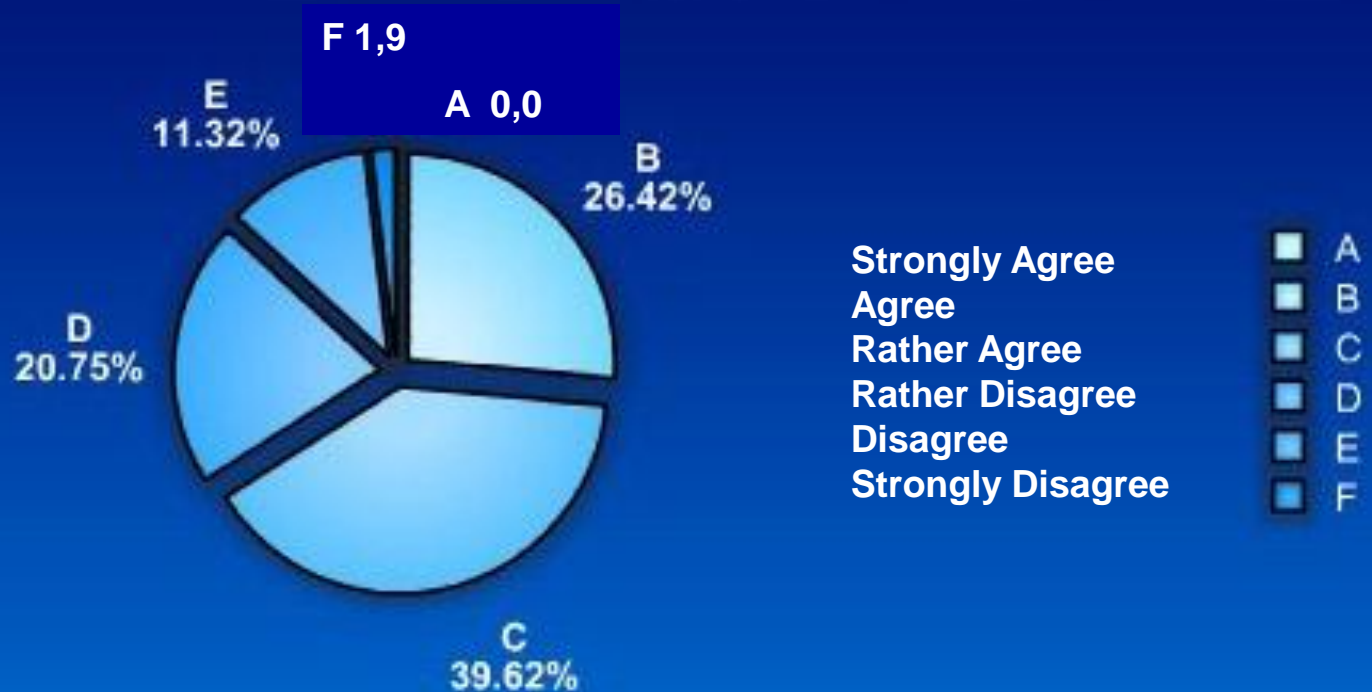
[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

18) Obama's physical appearance has considerable influence on how I perceive his skills as a politician. Do you agree?



[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

19) I think that Obama's Presidency has changed the expectations of black men. Do you agree?

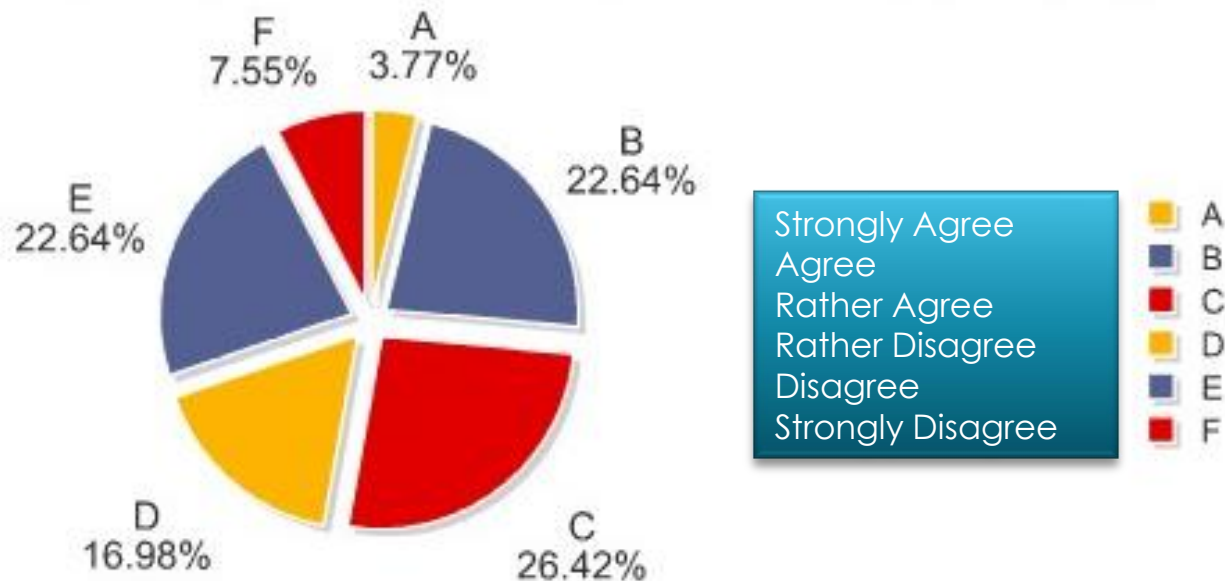


[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

Political Issues

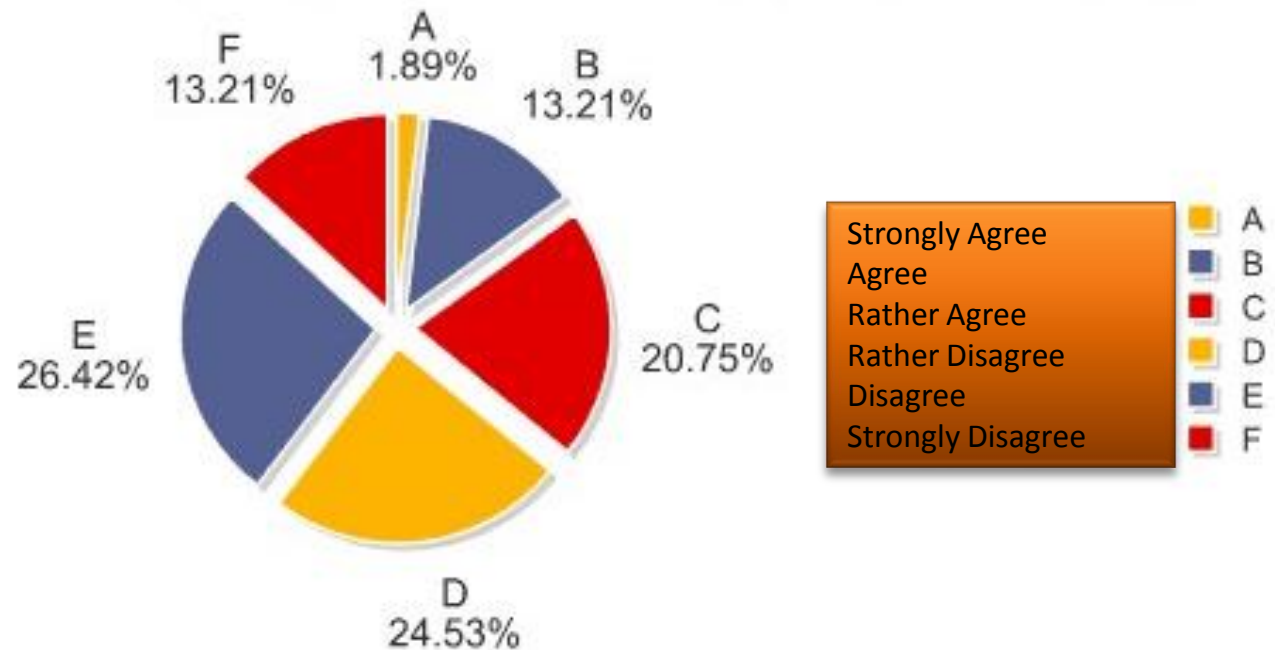


20) My image of politicians was positively affected after Obama's election campaign. Do you agree?



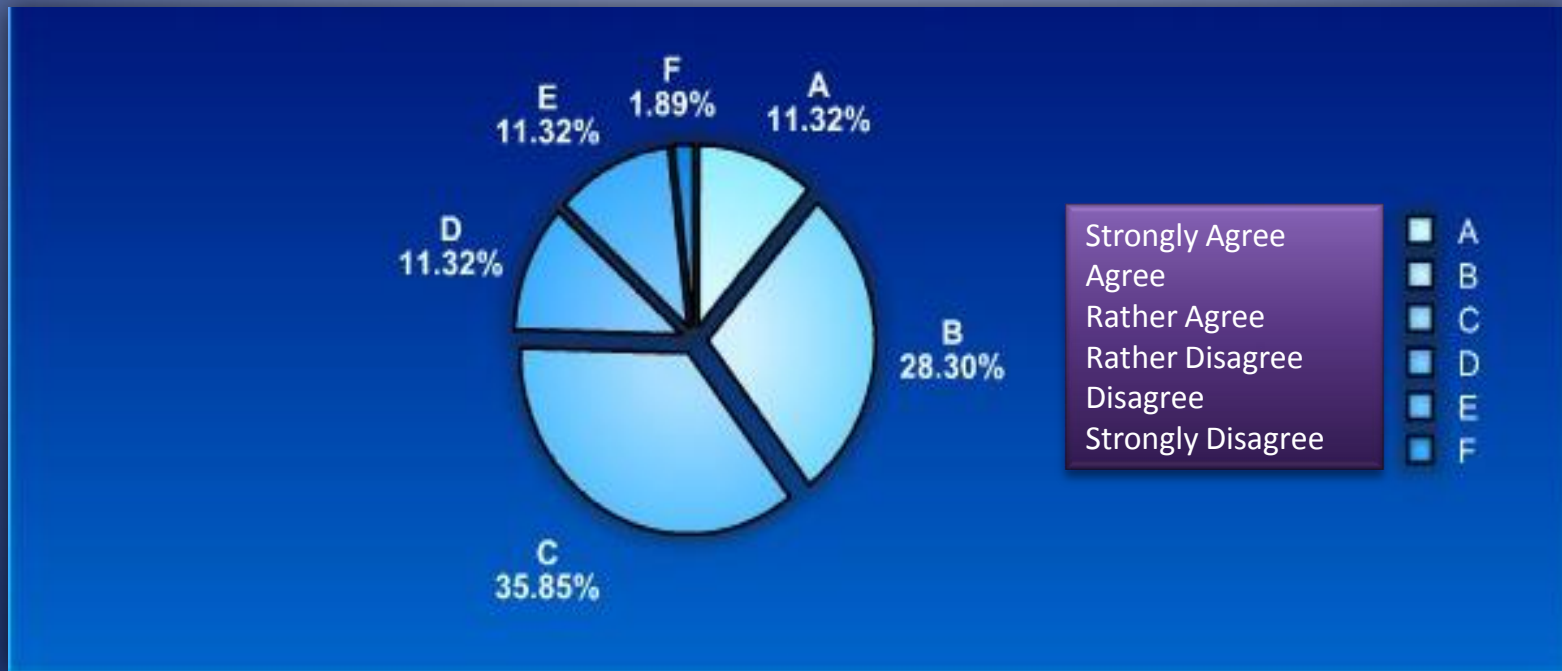
[For a detailed analysis of these questions, please follow this link](#)

21) My image of politicians has been positively affected since Obama's inauguration. Do you agree?



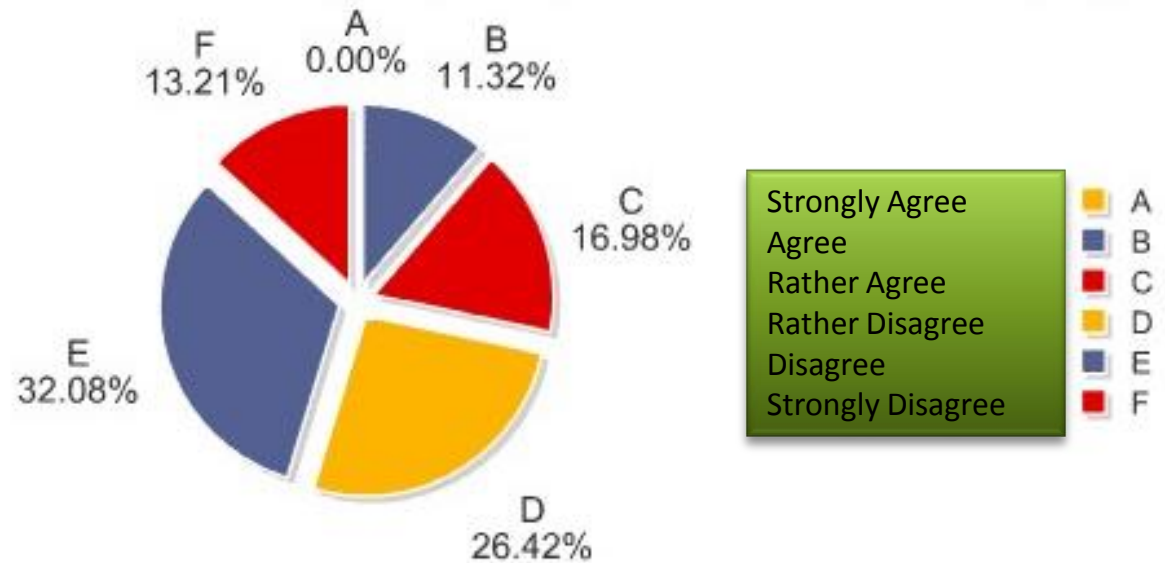
[For a detailed analysis of these questions, please follow this link](#)

22) Future politicians will try to copy Obama's public image. Do you agree?



[For a detailed analysis of these questions, please follow this link](#)

23) A black president has more difficulties in pushing his weight around in the White House. Do you agree?



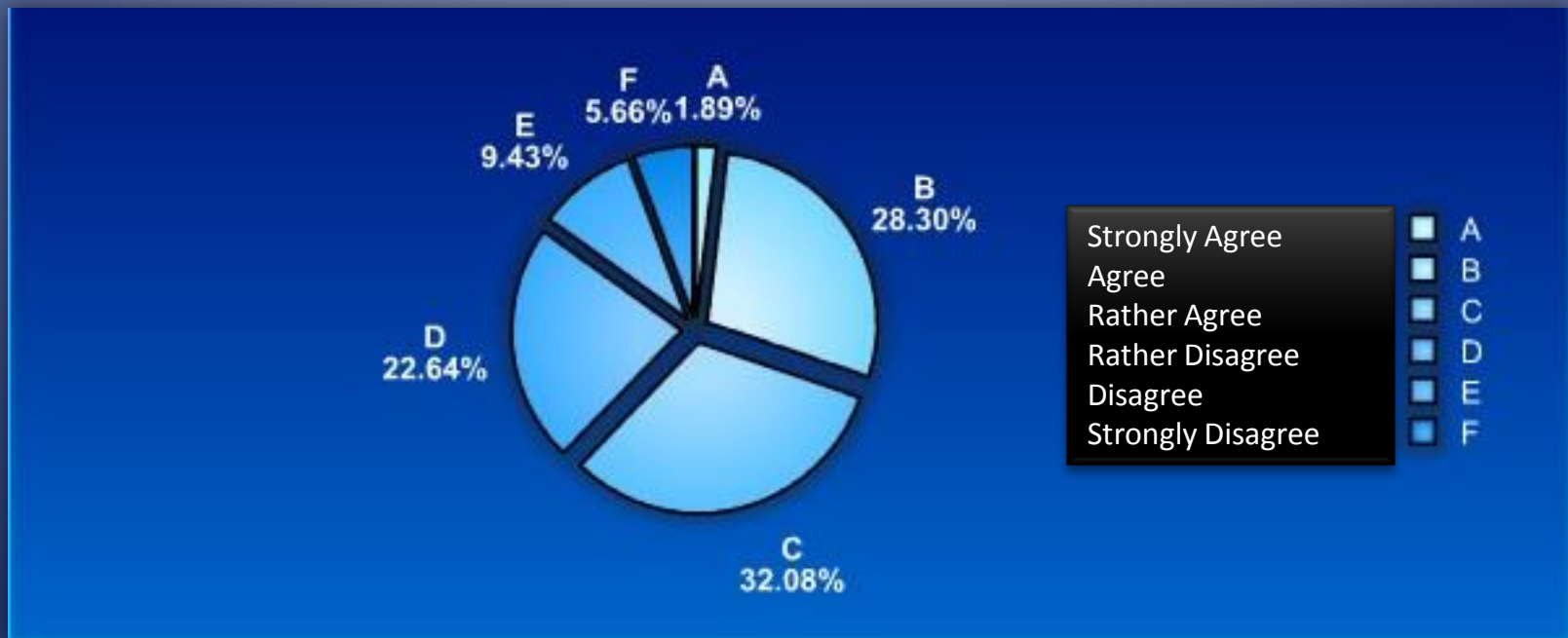
[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

24) A black president is better able to deal with social issues. Do you agree?



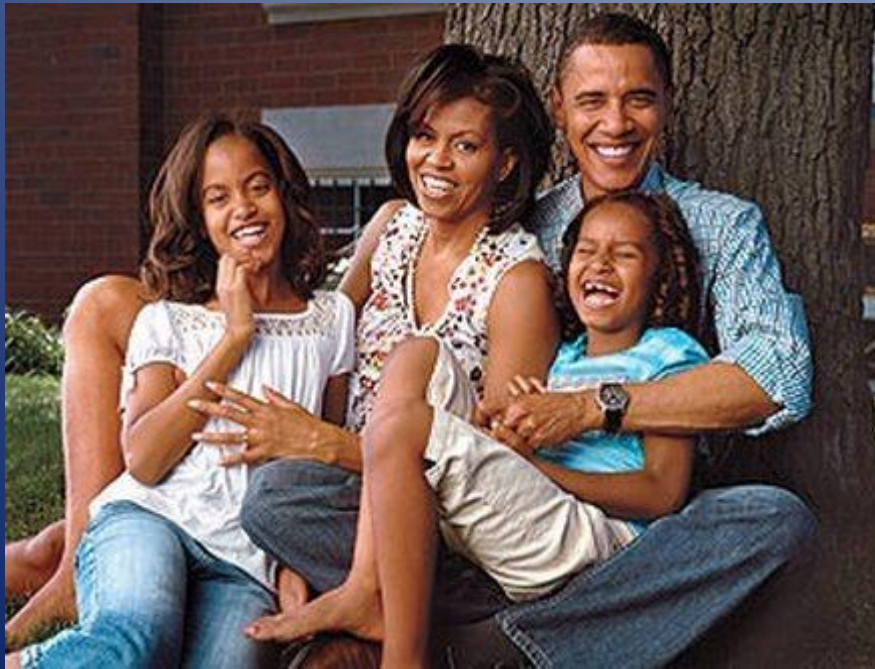
[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

25) Obama has focused/will focus on the problems and issues of minorities during his presidency. Do you agree?

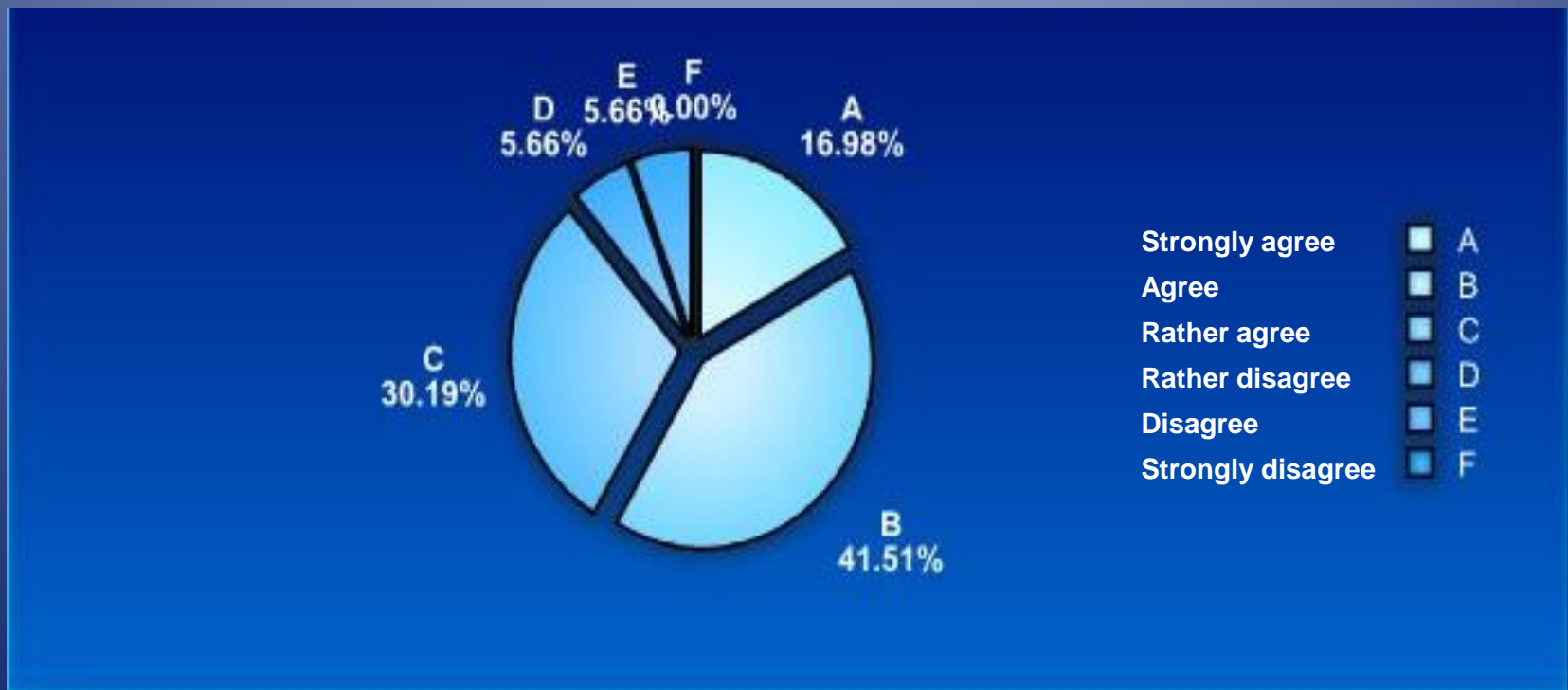


[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

The Obama Family in the Role of the Presidential Family

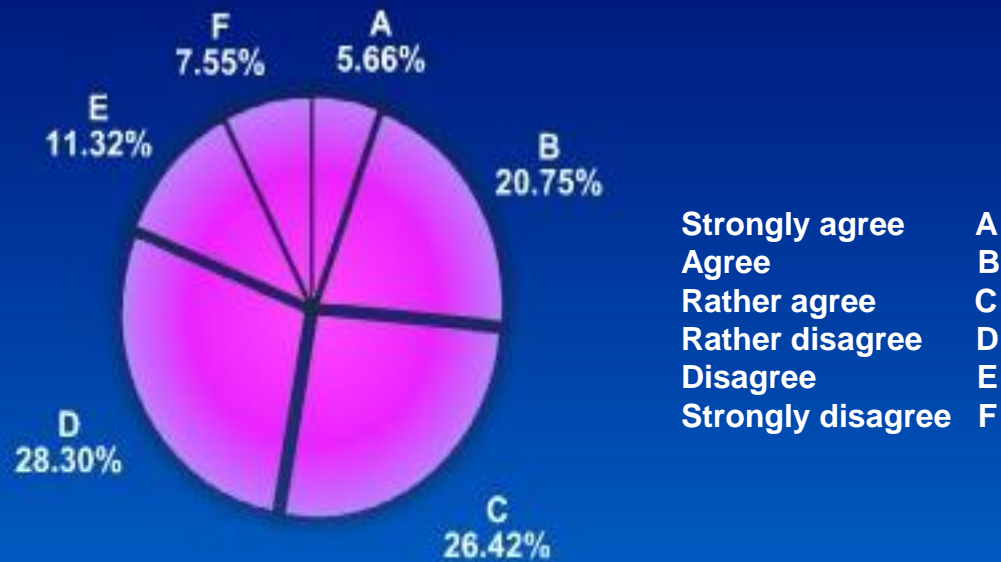


26) Presidential families like Obama's are often regarded as role models for American families. Do you agree?



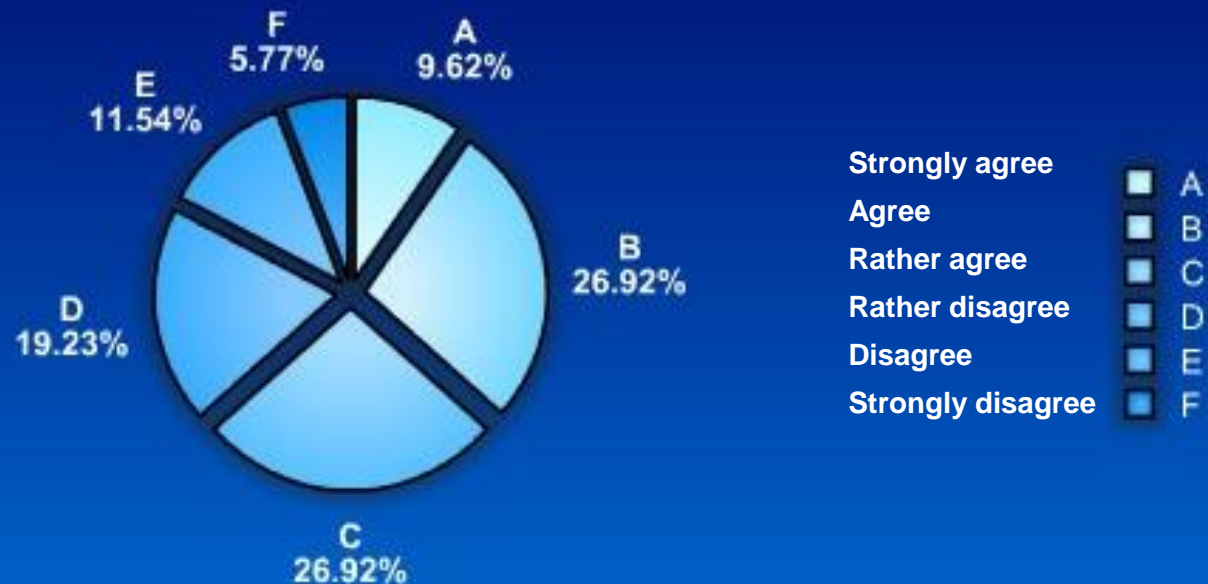
[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

27) During Obama's election campaign, the Obama family was perceived as the typical middle class black family (Bill Cosby myth). Do you agree?



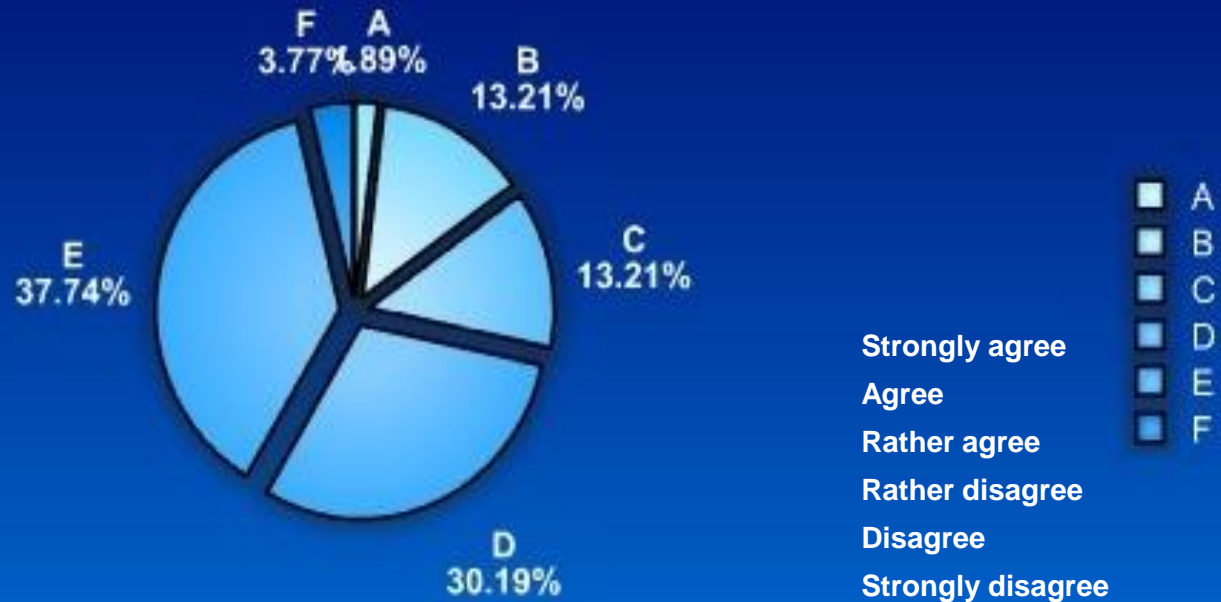
[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

28) Michelle Obama is one of the most powerful women to influence American society. Do you agree?



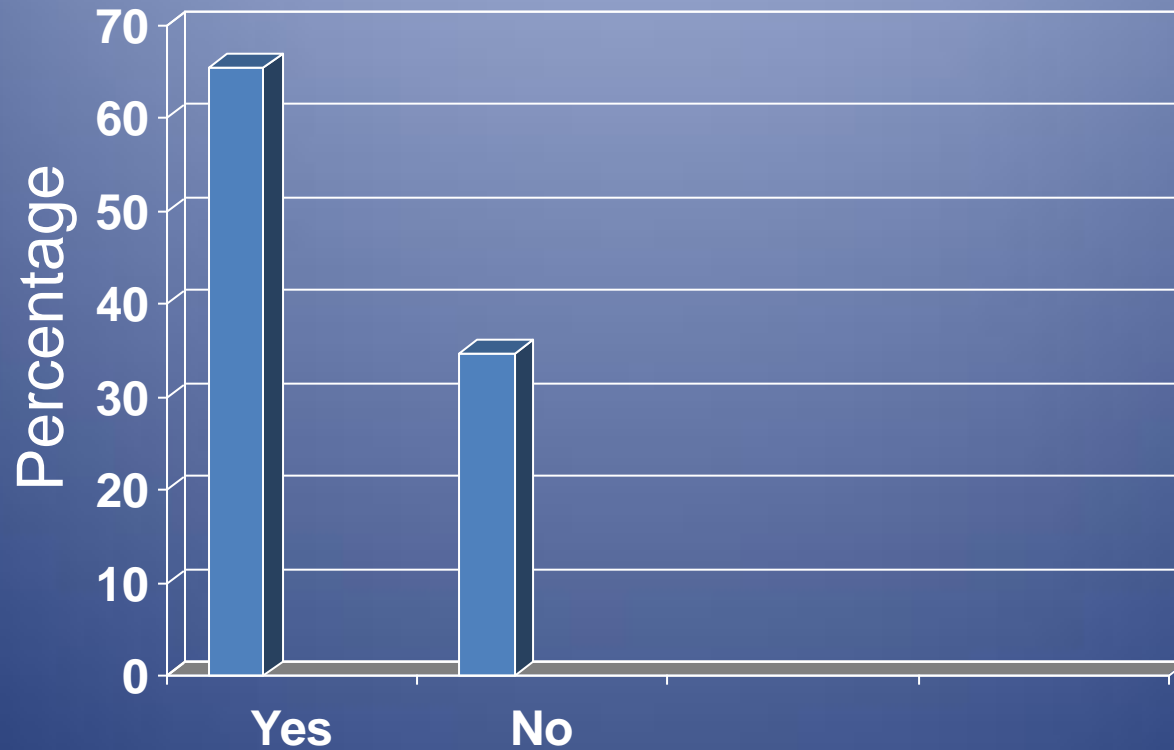
[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

29) Obama's children Malia and Sasha are the new trendsetters of their generation. Do you agree?



[For a detailed analysis of this question, please follow this link](#)

30) If today was Election Day, would you vote for Obama?



Summary & Outlook

The results of our survey demonstrate the complex set of attitudes US American citizens have about their current President, Barack Obama. While the President has not lost all of his positive standing among the American public, an increasing amount of negativity has appeared in the two years since his election. The results of question 13 clearly exemplify this trend, as can be seen by the sheer number of negative adjectives used to describe Obama at the time of the survey in comparison to the relatively small number used at the time of his election. This can be explained by the fact that the standards to which Obama is held today are now comparable to those to which an ordinary politician is held, and also by the fact that the realities of performing as President present many hardships for Obama that cannot be solely overcome by personal qualities such as charisma or by the illusion of hope. The results also display a readiness on the part of Americans to criticize the decisions Obama has made during his Presidency, which can be seen by the examples of a few of the issues in which many feel Obama has performed poorly in question 15.

Furthermore, while a slight majority of respondents agreed that Obama's attractiveness was indeed a factor for his success, the vast majority disagreed that his appearance plays a major role in how they view his skills as a politician. This apparent discrepancy presents an interesting paradigm of the importance of appearance in American politics, and from the survey results, it could not be clearly stated if Obama's appearance was a deciding factor in his election.

Obama's public image has also been damaged since his inauguration, which has been exemplified by the results in questions 20 and 21. However, the successful management of this image during the election campaign will, according to respondents, be copied by politicians in the future. This can be attributed to the fact that Obama's image, while damaged during his Presidency, was greatly useful in gaining popularity and consequently an electorate, which is needed to be successful in American politics in the first place.

Summary & Outlook Cont'd

The respondents of our survey did not appear to believe that Obama's race would present him with problems while doing his job in the White House. Furthermore, while most did not believe that a black president is better able to deal with social issues, they did believe that Obama will focus on the issues of minorities during his presidency. While Americans were not convinced that Obama's race itself presents him with additional challenges or abilities while in office, they did believe that he will attend to minority issues during his presidency.

Americans were largely in agreement that the presidential family serves as a role model for American families and has a great deal of influence on American society in general. The ordinariness of Obama's family, which can be compared to the highly popular Cosby Show, was also generally perceived by a majority of respondents during his election campaign, which indicates a general acceptance in the way the Obama family was presented. Furthermore, both Michelle Obama and the Obama children were perceived to have a large influence in American society. Therefore, our results confirm the longstanding belief that the presidential family has the power to shape American family values in their actions as well as in the way they are presented to the public.

While our survey does not present a completely representative view of the American public, the results do show a strong trend that Obama's popularity is decreasing. Americans seem to be recognizing the realities of politics when it comes to delivering on promises made during the election campaign and have already begun to lower their opinions of Obama. If this trend is to continue in the coming two years during which Obama will still be in office, it may very well be at the expense of Obama's reelection in 2012. Yet from our results, Obama's appearance, race and family life do not seem to be hindering factors for his success. In fact, question 30 shows that hope is still alive for Obama, and as long as he is able to deliver on his campaign promises, the American public will continue to believe in the hope he has given them.

Analyses & Sources

Opinions Before & After the Election

The survey results from questions 11 and 12 illustrate a clear trend among the respondents. The percentage of respondents who had a *very positive* view of Obama decreased from 32% to 13%, while the total percentage of respondents who had a *positive* opinion of Obama remained at 32%. Those having a *rather positive* opinion of Obama doubled from 11% to 22%. Although the percentage of respondents who had a *rather negative* opinion of Obama decreased from 15% to 9%, the other two negative categories, namely *negative* and *very negative*, both increased (6% to 12% and 4% to 11%, respectively). These results point to a general worsening of the opinions of Obama from the time of his election to the time of the survey.

Of the 32% who had a *very positive* general opinion of Obama at the time of his election, 20% reported a worsening of their general opinion of Obama to either *positive* or *rather positive*, while 12% remained of the same opinion. 20% of the 32% of respondents who reported a *positive* opinion of Obama at the time of the election continued to have a *positive* opinion of Obama at the time of the survey, while 10% changed their opinion to *rather positive* and 2% to *negative*. 4% of the 11% of respondents who had a *rather positive* opinion of Obama at the time of his election kept this opinion at the time of the survey, while 3% changed their opinion to *rather negative*. 2% changed their opinion to *negative*, and the remaining 2% changed their opinion to *positive*. This is the one instance where the general opinion of Obama actually improved from the time of his election to the time of the survey.

Of the 15% of respondents who had a *rather negative* opinion of Obama at the time of his election, 6% held this opinion, 6% changed their opinion to *negative* and 3% changed their opinion to *very negative* at the time of the survey. Of the 6% who reported having a *negative* opinion of Obama at the time of his election, 2% kept this opinion, while 4% changed their opinion to *very negative*. None of the 4% of respondents who reported having a *very negative* opinion of Obama at the time of his election changed their opinion at the time of the survey.

Therefore, it can be concluded that although the majority of respondents did not change their general opinion of Obama between the time of the election and the time of the survey, those who experienced a change in opinion had a more negative opinion of Obama at the time of the survey. The reasons for this change will be discussed further in question 14.

Adjectives about Obama

Perhaps the most interesting component of the results for question 13 is the fact that over 130 different words were used to describe Obama. This indicates a diverse range of opinions concerning Obama and a diverse number of attributes for Obama that individuals deem to be significant when judging him. While some adjectives such as “charismatic”, “attractive”, and “friendly” indicate rather physical or personal attributes, other respondents focused merely on ideological or political stances and chose words such as “progressive”, “anti-business”, and “job-killing”. While the majority of personal attributes possessed a rather positive connotation, respondents who chose words relating to politics tended to use words with negative connotations. As could be expected, those who declared themselves to be Republicans tended to designate negative words to Obama, while those with a Democratic political orientation were likely to use positive words. No significant trend was found in relation to the gender of the respondents, although words such as “attractive” and “handsome” were solely named by female respondents. Not surprisingly, those who listed one word with a negative connotation tended to use negatively connoted words for the remaining five as well.

Although the large number of diverse words indicates a complex picture of Obama in the minds of American citizens, two main trends are evident from the results of this question. Firstly, the most commonly used words for both at the time of the election (32%) and the survey (16%) are “hope” and “hopeful”, which were also signature words in Obama’s election campaign. It is clear that many associate Obama with a hopeful outlook of the future, an indication that the circumstances and lives of Americans are believed to be, with Obama’s leadership, improved. However, it is important to note that “hope” and “hopeful” were listed only half as many times for the second part of the question. It can therefore be inferred that the hope associated with Obama has decreased in the first two years of his Presidency, or was at least not one of the first three attributes for Obama that came to mind.

The second most commonly listed words “intelligent” and “smart” also experienced a 4% decrease from the time of Obama’s election to the time of the survey. The third most commonly named word at the time of the election, “charismatic”, also underwent a 10 percent decrease at the time of the survey. Strikingly, the word “change”, which was named by 14% of respondents when asked to list adjectives about Obama at the time of his election, disappeared from the most commonly listed words list and dramatically decreased to 2%, perhaps an indication of the realities of politics and the decrease in belief that Obama would be able to perform in a manner atypical to US Presidents of the past. Taking the place of “change” in the list of the top four commonly listed adjectives is “optimistic”, with 10% of the respondents having chosen this word for Obama at the time of the survey.

The words “fresh”, “new”, “strong”, and “positive”, which were named relatively often with regard to Obama at the time of his election (6, 6, 4 and 3 times, respectively) completely disappeared in the list of words for the time of survey. In their places came words such as “unconfident”, “stressed”, “stalled” and “disastrous” (all of which were listed 2 times), among many others. Two positive notable exceptions are “hard-working”, “reliable”, “hard-working”, and “decisive”, all of which were only listed for Obama at the time of the survey.

It should be noted that words commonly possessing a neither negative nor positive connotation were not calculated in these results, as the small number of such words as well as the impossibility of determining the respondents’ intended connotation (if any) rendered such an attempt unnecessary. Examples of such words are “liberal” (6%)”, “serious” (2%) and “regular” (2%).

Secondly, when asked to provide the first three adjectives that came to mind at the time of Obama’s election, respondents listed a word with a positive connotation a total of 108 times. Negatively-connoted words, on the other hand, were listed a total of 24 times. The ratio of positive-negative words changed drastically when the respondents were asked to list three adjectives that came to mind at the time of the survey, however. In this case, positively-connoted words were given 51 times, while negatively-connoted words were given 63 times. This means that while positive associations with Obama were more than cut in half, negative associations with Obama increased almost threefold. Many of the negative words, however, did not indicate a negative opinion of Obama, but rather indicated Obama’s difficulties since arriving at the White House. Such words include “tired”, “stressed”, “stalled” and “overstrained”.

Changing Factors

38% of the respondents whose opinion of Obama had changed from the time of his election to the day they took the survey listed “bipartisanship” as the cause of their shift in opinion of Obama. These respondents were all between 25 and 29 years old and possessed at least a Bachelor’s degree. Of this 33%, however, two-thirds listed the opposition (meaning, the opposing political party) as the cause of this changing factor. One respondent stated, “those ideologically opposed will not compromise”, expressly placing the blame on others for this circumstance. Another wrote, “The opposition Obama has faced has prevented him from getting as much done as needed”. One-third gave at least partial blame to Obama, which can be seen in the following statement: “he has said many times that he wanted to work with both parties, but that has not been the case, per news reports”.

The second most listed reason (32%) for a change in opinion of Obama was the “government bailouts” during the recent financial crisis. All respondents who listed the bailouts as their reason for the change declared themselves as Moderate to Republican females over the age of 45. Some listed specific bailout programs such as the Troubled Asset Relief Program and the GM bailout, while others listed more general misgivings, such as “He gave our hard earned money away to greedy fools without consulting us”. These respondents are generally of the opinion that the bailouts have not helped the US economy recover.

The United States’ “continuing involvement in two wars” (8% for Afghanistan, 8% for Iraq) was listed by individuals who were generally positive about Obama and considered themselves to be Independents or Democrats. One respondent wrote, “He hasn't done what he said he'd do with Iraq. I saw an end in sight with him, but now, I don't”. This quote shows that the high hopes that many had for Obama have decreased due to a perceived discrepancy in his campaign promises and actual performance as President.

“Healthcare reform” (8%) the “BP oil spill” (7%) are two further reasons that point to a disappointment in Obama’s performance since his inauguration. No clear demographical tendency was found among these respondents. While one respondent wrote about healthcare, “Couldn't get it passed”, another wrote concerning the BP Oil Spill, “Very inconsequent handling of the crisis”.

Lastly, “stupidity” (8%) was explained by the following statement: “He is trying to ruin this country”. Such a broad statement is difficult to classify, but a general dissatisfaction with both the ideological stances as well as actions of Obama can be assumed in this case.

In summary, a broad range of reasons caused a negative change in opinion of 36% of the respondents. While many of these issues are ongoing, it can be assumed that these opinions will also continue to form as Obama continues on as President. For example, at the time of the survey, the oil spill in the Gulf Coast had not yet been contained. At this point in time, the spill has been contained. Such issues show that the opinions of many US citizens about their President may change with the turn of events and are not able to be indefinitely determined from one survey.

Obama's Physical Appearance

Concerning Obama's physical appearance, most participants did not agree that it might have been an obstacle for him being elected President. Only 4% *agreed* that his physical appearance might have hindered him, because in comparison to former U.S. Presidents, Obama is rather skinny. Only 2% (male) *strongly agreed* and 2% *rather agreed* with this question. Most participants, however, were not of the opinion that Obama's skinny physical appearance might have been an obstacle for him being elected President and consequently paid attention to his skills as a politician, rather than to his looks. The fact that the those who *strongly agreed* or *rather agreed* were male shows that they have a certain image of how a strong politician's appearance should be.

Most of the people who *disagreed* were female (8% in contrast to 2% males). However, the vast majority of all people *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*. 30% of male and 20% of female participants *disagreed* with this question. Most female participants (22%) *strongly disagreed*, whereas only 13% of male participants *strongly disagreed* with this question. This shows that the female participants were more likely to pay attention to a politician's skills than to his physical appearance.

In conclusion, one can state that the vast majority of people (96%) *rather disagreed, disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with the claim that Obama's skinny physical appearance might have been an obstacle for him being elected President. Consequently, most people paid attention to the candidate's skills as a politician and to his promises, rather than to his looks. Only 4% *strongly agreed* or *rather agreed* with this question. As these 4 % were male, this shows that some men still had a certain image of how a politician should look like. Consequently, some men suggested that a candidate who appears physically strong is also a strong politician and is probably more likely to be successful in achieving his aims.

There was no clear trend between the participant's political orientation and how they answered this question . The 4% who *strongly agreed* or *rather agreed* did not have a specific political orientation or declared themselves as Democrats. There is a balanced number of Democrats and Republicans who *rather disagreed, disagreed* or *strongly disagreed*.

Obama's Attractiveness and Success

For this question, there was a balanced number between participants who *agreed* and who *disagreed* that Obama's attractiveness might have been a reason for his success. Only 2% (female) *strongly agreed* that Obama's attractiveness was a reason for his success. There was also a balanced number of males and females who *agreed* (7%) or *rather agreed* (20%). This answer was quite surprising because in the previous question, most participants stated they did not agree that Obama's skinny appearance was an obstacle. However, for this question, the majority of participants stated that Obama's attractiveness was indeed a factor for his success. Consequently, although a politician's skinniness does not appear to be a hindering factor in his success, his level of attractiveness is still important. This confirms what Asam (2009, p.159) suggests when pointing out that even today, black men are highly sexualized. As Orelus (2010, p.65) states, "Black men are imagined as peripatetic phalluses with unrequited desire for their denied object-white women". This might be an explanation as to why many white women had a positive attitude towards Obama. As Orelus (2010, p.84) writes, "by association Obama's masculinity symbolically and ideologically reflects the hegemonic interests of straight, white men who have legislated and enacted the patriarchal rules". Therefore, a majority of the participants rather agreed that Obama's attractiveness was a factor for his success but did not notice his skinny figure and disagreed that this was obstacle for him.

However, some respondents were not of the opinion that Obama's attractiveness was a factor in his success. 10% of males and females *rather disagreed*. Here again, the number of males and females was balanced.

Most people who *disagreed* were male (13%), in contrast to 5% females. This shows that women perceived Obama as a man and not as a politician and paid attention to his appearance more than man did. Only a minority of 3% *strongly disagreed* that Obama's attractiveness was a reason for his success. Again, the number of males and females was balanced.

In contrast to the previous question, the results for this question were quite surprising. Whereas the majority of participants stated that they *disagree* that Obama's skinny physical appearance has been an obstacle for him, about 50% people said that they think that his attractiveness has been a reason for his success. Consequently, most people pay attention to a politician's appearance but not to his body shape. Furthermore, most people regarded attractiveness as a factor for success but did not consider a skinny body shape to be an obstacle. What is also surprising is that there were almost no differences between male and female respondents in their answers. One might have thought that a greater number of females would have paid attention to the attractiveness of a presidential candidate.

Relationship Between Physical Appearance and Political Skills

When considering the results of the previous question, the results for this question are quite surprising, as a vast majority of the respondents stated they think that Obama's physical appearance did not have any influence on how they perceived his skills as a politician. Only 2% (male) stated that they *strongly agree*. 3% *agreed* with this question and 5% percent *rather agreed*. For both answers, the number of males and females was balanced. This means that according to our survey, there are no differences between men and women on how they perceive the influence of a politician's physical appearance on his political skills.

The majority of participants, however, *disagreed* that these two factors are related. 11% of males *rather disagreed*, whereas only 5% of females *rather disagreed*. The vast majority of participants *disagreed* with this statement. With 13% males and 16% females, this figure is again almost balanced.

However, even more people *strongly disagreed* that there is a relation between Obama's physical appearance and his political skills (18%). For this group, there are almost no differences between male and female participants. This shows that regardless of the gender of the respondents, they did not think that Obama's physical appearance had considerable influence on how they perceived his skills as a politician. This matches the result of question 16, where most participants stated that they did not perceive Obama's skinny appearance to be an obstacle for him.

However, when comparing the results of question 17 to the results of this question, it is quite surprising that half of the participants stated they indeed think that Obama's attractiveness was a reason for his success. On the one hand, they thought there was a relation between Obama's attractiveness and success. On the other hand, most participants did not see a relationship between his appearance and how his political skills were perceived. An explanation for this could be that they believe that other people might think that Obama's attractiveness was a factor for his success, but that personally, they are not of this opinion.

Obama and the Expectations of Black Men

Concerning this question, there was a wide range of opinions. No one *strongly agreed* with this statement; however, 9% of males and even 17% percent of females *agreed*. The vast majority of 39% *rather agreed* (with the same amount of males and females). A reason for this could be that many people think Obama is a good role model, especially for African Americans. Although many people are still prejudiced against black people, Obama has created a completely new image of blacks. Since he also serves as a role model, many people may think that the African American youth is now trying to copy this image. This conforms to what Orelus (2010, p.64) points out. As Orelus puts it, factors such as world history have shaped the identity, behavior and actions of black men. Consequently, Obama's public image can indeed shape how black men are perceived by society.

However, there were also respondents who did not agree with this statement. About 20% of the participants *rather disagreed*, whereas only 9% of males and 2% percent of females *disagreed*. Only 2 % (females) *strongly disagreed* with this statement.

The results of this question show that the largest percentage of the participants are of the opinion that Obama changed expectations for black men. Many people are still prejudiced against African-Americans. As Obama has a good background and attended college, many people might think that he has the ability to be a good role model for the American youth. Furthermore, many people may now be discarding their prejudices, as they realize that being African-American does not automatically mean having a bad background or being uneducated.

Concerning the other demographic figures in relation to the way respondents answered this question, no clear trend was found.

The Image of Politicians

The respondents' answers to this question are not very surprising. People who *strongly agreed* or *agreed* with the statement that their image of politicians was positively affected after Obama's election campaign tended to be Democrats. They also had a *very positive* or *positive* image of Obama directly after his election campaign. However, it is important to note the downshift by 50% from *very positive* to *positive* and by 25% from *positive* to *rather positive* when it comes to Obama's image at the time of the survey. Regarding the general image of politicians after Obama's campaign, respondents maintained a *rather positive* attitude at the time of the survey, although 33% only *rather agreed* and 16% even lost their favorable perception. Accordingly, 92% thought that future politicians will try to copy Obama's political style.

The people who stated that their image of politicians has been influenced positively after Obama's campaign also tended to consider themselves Democrats, with only 14% listing themselves as Republicans. This general opinion of Obama at the end of his campaign was either *very positive* or *positive*. It is remarkable that in contrast to the people who *strongly agreed* or *agreed*, 57% claimed that their opinion of politicians was no longer positively affected at the time of the survey. However, 93% of those respondents still thought that future politicians will copy Obama's style.

Please note: the percentages in this section "Political issues" were broken down into smaller percentages that were again based on a 100% whole.

67% of the respondents who *rather disagreed* that their image of politician's was positively affected after Obama's campaign were female and their political orientation tended to be Republican. About 78% of this group had a favorable opinion of Obama at the time of his election. At the time of the survey, 67% were still of this opinion. However, 33% (compared to 20% at the time of his election) had an unfavorable opinion of him at the time of the survey. After Obama's inauguration, one can also perceive a downshift in people's opinions about politicians in this group. While about 10% had a slightly positive image, 33% *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with the proposal. 45% thought that future politicians will not try to copy Obama's image.

The people who disagreed with Question 20 were fairly mixed in gender, with a slight tendency towards the Republicans in their political orientation. At the time of his election, this group had a generally negative opinion of Obama. About 59% shared a *rather negative* or *negative* view. This trend was even stronger at the time of the survey. Only 33% had a favorable opinion at all. Half of them had a *rather positive* opinion, while at the time of his election, favorable responses were exclusively *strongly positive* or *positive*. 67% had an unfavorable opinion of the President at the time of the survey, with 50% being *strongly negative* or *negative*. However, Obama's widely perceived inability to change the reputation of politicians did not worsen at the time of the questionnaire. Surprisingly, about 60% thought that politicians will try to copy Obama's style.

75% of the people who answered Question 20 with *strongly negative* were female. The whole group was mixed in age and mainly listed themselves as independents. This entire group had an unfavorable opinion on Obama at the time of his election (with 50% each being *rather negative* or *strongly negative*). At the time of his election, 25% were *rather negative* about him. 75% had a *strongly negative* opinion. Obama could also do nothing to change the reputation of politicians after his inauguration. However, despite the fact that Obama could not alter their general opinion of politicians, 50% still think that future politicians will copy his public image.

What is striking about this set of questions is that respondents who experienced a general improvement in their perceptions of politicians had a significantly good image of Obama at the time of his election and still held a positive image when they took part in the survey. The more negative the image of politicians is among the respondents, the greater the number of them becomes who already disliked Obama at the time of his election. However, almost every group is of the opinion that future politicians will try to copy Obama's public image. But here, Obama advocates will perceive this as positive, whereas Obama critics will rather be of the opposite opinion.

Difficulties for a Black President

When it comes to the question of whether Obama has difficulties in pushing his weight around in the White House, 28% were of this opinion, while no one *strongly agreed*. The political orientation of the 11% who affirmed this question was mainly Democratic. It is also remarkable that all people in this group had a favorable opinion of Obama before the election, and most of them still had this opinion at the time of the survey.

Respondents who only *rather agreed* with question 23 (17%) were balanced in gender and age. However, their political orientation was almost exclusively Democratic. All respondents of this group had a favorable opinion of Obama at the time of his election and still did at the time of the survey. However, 56% of this group had a *positive* opinion on Obama, whereas at the time of his election, the same amount of people had a *very positive* opinion. In general, enthusiasm for Obama has slightly decreased.

Those who *rather disagreed* with a black president having problems in office because of his race formed approximately 26% of the responses. They were slightly more often female, were balanced in age and had a slight Democratic political orientation. 14% had a rather negative opinion of Obama at the time of his election, a number that had doubled at the time of the survey.

Those who disagreed with Question 23 form the largest group of respondents (32%). 59% of this group were female. They were balanced in age and strongly identified as Democrats. 65% of the whole group had a *positive* or *very positive* image of Obama at the time of his election. About 35% had a generally negative image of him at that time, with 24% being *rather negative* about him. At the time of the survey, 41% had an unfavorable opinion on Obama, with 35% being either *negative* or *very negative* about him. 59% continued to have a favorable opinion of Obama, which was balanced between *positive* and *rather positive*.

13% *strongly disagreed* with the statement in this question. 71% of these respondents were male, and 71% were between 25 and 31. The entire group's political orientation was largely Republican. 72% of the respondents had an unfavorable opinion on Obama at the time of his election, with 14% being *strongly negative*. 28% had a generally positive opinion, which was balanced between *strongly positive* and *positive*. These people had the same positive opinion of Obama at the time of the survey, while the rate of people strongly opposing Obama tripled.

What is significant about the question of whether a black president has difficulties in pushing his weight around in the White House is that people who rather oppose Obama and, additionally, tend towards the Republicans do not think that race is an obstacle for Obama's office. While the first group might seek to excuse some actions by Obama with this claim, the second group attempts the opposite. Obama alone is responsible for the mistakes he makes.

Social Issues

No one *strongly agreed* with the statement that a black president is better able to deal with social issues, but 13% *agreed* with the statement. Those who *agreed* were balanced in gender and about 71% of this group were between 19 and 32. The political orientation here was anonymously Democratic and all of them had a favorable opinion of Obama at the time of his election. 43% had a *very positive* opinion about him. At the time of the survey, this affirmation remained constant. However, 14% switched their opinion from *very positive* to *positive*. 86% of this group also thought that a black president might have problems in pushing his weight around in the White House (14% did not think so).

Approximately 21% *rather agreed* with Question 24. They were balanced in gender and age and about 64% were Democratic in their political orientation. This entire group had a favorable opinion about Obama at the time of his election, with 55% being *positive* about him. At the time of the survey, 91% still had a favorable opinion of Obama, with 46% being *rather positive*. 9% had a *rather negative* opinion of him. 55% of this group also thought that a black president might have problems in pushing his weight around in the White House (36% *rather agreed*, while the same percentage *rather disagreed*).

Approximately 30% (the largest group) rather disagreed with the statement. 56% of them were female, and 69% were under 36. About 75% were Democratic in their political orientation. 94% of had a favorable opinion of Obama at the time of his election, with 50% being *very positive* about him. At the time of the survey, 88% still had this favorable opinion, with 56% being *positive*. 13% had a generally negative opinion of him. Only 19% of this group also agreed that a black president could have problems in pushing his weight around in the White House (44% *rather disagreed* and 31% *disagreed*).

Approximately 21% *disagreed* with the statement. They were balanced in gender and age. They had a slightly more Democratic than Republican political orientation. 55% of this group had a favorable opinion of the President at the time of his election, which was balanced between *very positive* and *positive*. 36% had a rather negative opinion at the time of his election. At the time of the survey, 54% had an unfavorable opinion on Obama, with 36% being *negative*. All of them disagreed that a black president could have problems in pushing his weight around in the White House (82% *disagreed*).

Approximately 15% *strongly disagreed* with question 24. 63% of this group was male, and they were balanced in age. 63% of the whole group was Republican in their political orientation and 88% had an unfavorable opinion of Obama at the time of his election (with 38% being *rather negative*). At the time of the survey, the whole group had a generally negative opinion on Obama, with 63% being *very negative*. All respondents of this group did not think that a black president had problems in pushing his weight around in the White House (with 50% *strongly disagreeing*).

People who agreed with the question whether Obama is especially able to deal with social issues were strong supporters of Obama before and after his election. They also thought that he would focus more on minorities. The more negative initial and current opinions on Obama became, the lesser people agreed on the claim, although people who *rather disagreed* still had a *positive* general opinion of Obama.

Issues of Minorities

Only one person strongly agreed with the statement. 28% of the respondents *agreed* with the statement. 60% of this group were male and 53% were 49 or older. 80% listed themselves as Democrats in their political orientation and the same number had a favorable opinion of Obama at the time of his election, with 40% being *positive*. At the time of the survey, 80% had a generally positive opinion, with only slight movement from *very positive* to *positive* and *negative* to *very negative*.

32% of the respondents *rather agreed* with Question 25. They were balanced in gender and 70% were 37 or younger. 44% of the entire group considered themselves to be Democrats and 71% had a favorable opinion of Obama at the time of his election, with 30% being *very positive* and a further 30% being *positive*. At the time of the survey, 65% still had a generally positive opinion, with a movement from *very positive* to *positive* and *rather positive*.

23% of the respondents *rather disagreed* with the statement. 58% were female and 33% were 29 or younger. 46% listed themselves as Democrats. All of them had a favorable opinion of Obama at the time of his election, with 42% being *positive*. At the time of the survey, 75% still had a favorable opinion, with 50% being *rather positive*.

9% of the respondents *disagreed* with the statement. 60% were male and 80% were 48 or older. 60% had a political tendency towards the Democrats. The same percentage had a favorable opinion of Obama at the time of his election, with 40% being *very positive*. At the time of the survey, the same amount had a generally positive opinion, with 40% being *positive*.

6% of the respondents *strongly disagreed* with the statement. All of them were male and 2/3 were under 27. All of them had an unfavorable opinion on Obama at the time of his election, with 66% being *very negative*. At the time of the survey, the results were exactly the same.

After analyzing the results, one can say that people who agreed in any form with the statement have a significantly favorable opinion of Obama and do not believe that he is better able to deal with social issues. People who *rather disagreed* or *disagreed* were still positive about the President and were mainly Democrats. Only people who *strongly disagreed* had a negative opinion of Obama at the time of his election. No group thought that he is better able to deal with social issues.

The Obama Family as Role Models

Since the beginning of American history, the traditional meaning of family played a large role in American society. Throughout the centuries, the families of politicians and celebrities served as examples of stable American families. Therefore, it is not surprising that the results of our survey confirm that the presidential family tends to serve as a role model for American families.

89% agreed that the presidential family serves a role model for a typical functional family, whereas only 12% of the respondents disagreed with this statement. Regarding gender, the results do not differ greatly between females and males. 8% of the 53 participants were males who strongly agreed that Obama's family is seen as a role model, while 9% were females. The majority of both sexes clearly agreed with this statement, as can be seen from the following figures: 19% of males and 23% of females.

On the contrary, only 12% rather disagreed or disagreed that they consider presidential families like Obama's as an example the standard American family as it should be. The distribution slightly differs between the two genders. 6% of males *rather disagreed* and 4% *disagreed*, whereas only 2% of females *disagreed*. None of the participants *strongly disagreed*.

The results indicate that there is little difference between men and women in their opinions concerning the importance of the Obama family in American society. Indeed, there was only one bachelor President, James Buchanan (1857–1861), which supports the claim that having a family is an important attribute of an attractive presidential candidate. Every other President was married (with or without children) or had divorced and remarried. Their ways of coping with their personal lives attracts great public attention and is followed intensely by the media.

The Bill Cosby Myth

One of the most popular American sitcoms, which was about a black middle class family with a mother, father and five children, had its television debut in 1984 . The start of this sitcom marked a new era of American television, as for the first time, the main characters were black and both parents were academics. Before this sitcom, black actors often played supporting roles where they helped the main white character be or do his best. This kind of character is called a magic negro and is often cited in literature. Regarding the fact that Obama is the first black president and also has a wife who is successful in her career, it is self-evident to ask if Obama can be compared to the myth of Bill Cosby, a man who achieved nearly everything, at least in his show.

6% of the participants *strongly agreed* with the statement that the Obama family can be compared to the myth of the Bill Cosby show. 21% *agreed* with this statement and 26% *rather agreed*. This shows a clear tendency among the respondents to believe in the myth.

On the contrary, 28% *rather disagreed*, 11% *disagreed* and 8% *strongly disagreed*. A possible reason for this is that the respondents who *disagreed* did not want to compare the President with a figure on television. As we have already mentioned in the introduction, this survey is not representative of American society as a whole but serves as an indication that certain generally-held beliefs do indeed exist. Nevertheless, in this case, it is utterly important to note that the vast majority of the respondents listed themselves as white and only 2% as African American.

Michelle Obama's Influence

The First Ladies have been prominent figures throughout the history of the United States. They not only were the wives of some of the most powerful men in the world; they also used their status and power to advocate for social projects and assistance. A great example is Hillary Clinton, a woman who used her status to not only engage in social issues but to also establish herself in society and the political sphere. As we can see today, she transformed from the First Lady to Senator, and from Senator to the current Secretary of State. It seems as though she has changed the meaning of the role of a first Lady. This begs the following question: does Michelle Obama, the current First Lady, have the same power and therefore great influence on the American people?

The results of our survey indicate that Michelle does indeed hold a great deal of influence in society. 10% of the participants *strongly agreed* with this statement and 54% *agreed* or *rather agreed*. On the opposite end of the spectrum, 19% *rather disagreed* that Michelle is influential and a further 12% *disagreed*. Only 6% responded that they *strongly disagree* with this statement. After comparing the results of this question to the results of question 26, where it was asked if the presidential family is seen as role model for American families, one can notice a slight difference. 89% were of the opinion that the Obama family influences the society as a whole, whereas 64% of the respondents believed that Michelle holds a great deal of influence in her own right.

After evaluating the results, it should be noted that this survey question did not mention or imply any specific kind of influence. It was not made clear if this influence was limited to the e.g. political or social sphere. Therefore, a statement cannot be made about the respondents' opinions concerning Michelle Obama's influence in any certain sphere of society.

The Presidential Children as Trendsetters

As was mentioned in question 26, the President is not the only Obama under strong scrutiny; his wife and children are as well. Every presidential child must come to terms with constant appearances in the press, where every step is closely documented and analyzed. Sasha, one of the two “White House” girls, was not allowed to attend a Miley Cyrus concert. An article appeared in the press about this decision, and discussions erupted in the tabloids about Michelle and Barack Obama’s childrearing skills. Both Sasha and Malia are judged by their clothes, haircuts and toys. One is thus left with the impression that Sasha and Malia are seen as trendsetters.

Therefore, it is surprising that the results of our survey show do not support this assumption. Only 2% of the respondents *strongly agreed* that the Obama children are trendsetters, while 26% *agreed* or *rather agreed*. On the contrary, nearly 30% *rather disagreed*, whereas the largest group of participants (38%) *disagreed* with this statement and 4% *strongly disagreed*. From a gender perspective, there was a slight difference between the two sexes. Altogether, 19% Females *agreed*. 2% of females *strongly agreed*; in contrast, 2% of females *strongly disagreed*. The largest group of female respondents answered in the range from *rather disagree* to *disagree* with 30%. 38% of male respondents were also in this range.

However, there are different aspects which have to be considered when analyzing the results. For example, it is not clear whether the respondents generally disagreed with the statement that presidential children are trendsetters or with the statement that the *current* children are seen as trendsetters. In this respect, it would also be interesting to compare the answers of a younger generation (e.g. 9 – 16 years old) with the results of the older generations that were questioned in this survey.

Sources

List of Works Cited

ASAM, JARIBI, (2009), *What Obama Means for Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Future*, New York: Harper

ORELUS, PIERRE W., (2010), *Afterword: The Agony of Masculinity. Race Gender and Education in the Age of New Racism and Patriarchy*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing

Internet Sources

4 More 4 Number 44: Obama Portrait (2009) [online]

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Obama Portrait 2006.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Obama_Portrait_2006.jpg)

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

Blogspot (2010) [online]

http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_CbKBQZh3QxM/SQz99F-ogzI/AAAAAAAAACRA/fMRJJP2z3_s/s400/sideview.jpg

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

Media Cynic: Barack Obama is Stressed Out on Mad Magazine's Cover
(2009) [online]

<http://www.mediacycnic.com/blog/127091>

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

Sources

Melanie's Journeys: Obama Family (2009) [online]

<http://melaniesjourneys.files.wordpress.com/2009/05/obama-family-people.jpg>

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

NRC Multimedia: Obama Familie (2008) [online]

[http://www.nrc.nl/multimedia/dynamic/00185/obama familie reute 185675e.jpg](http://www.nrc.nl/multimedia/dynamic/00185/obama_familie_reute_185675e.jpg)

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

Photobucket: Obama Brushing that Dirt Off His Shoulder (2010) [online]

<http://i83.photobucket.com/albums/j304/rikannekt/ObamaBrushingthatDirtOffHisShoulder.jpg>

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

Popcrunch: Obama Washingtonian Shirtless (2009) [online]

[http://www.popcrunch.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/obama washingtonian shirtless.jpg](http://www.popcrunch.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/obama_washingtonian_shirtless.jpg)

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

Sources

The State.com: Brad Warthen's Blog (2008) [online]

<http://blogs.thestate.com/bradwarthensblog/2008/01/obamas-full-vic.html>

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

Think Progress: Steele agrees with caller: Obama 'is the magic Negro (2009) [online]

<http://thinkprogress.org/2009/05/01/steele-magic-negro-joke/>

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

Wikipedia: James Buchanan (2010) [online]

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Buchanan

Accessed on: 4 October 2010

Zimbio: Transcript: Obama's Address to the Joint Sessions of Congress

(2009) [online]

<http://www.zimbio.com/Obama+Speech+Feb.+24,+2009/articles/6/Transcript+Obama+Address+Joint+Sessions+Congress>

Accessed on: 4 October 2010