

Forbes '08 Tracker

A Cult Of Presidential Personality

Clifford Marks 06.17.08, 6:00 PM ET

Republican presidential nominee John McCain has spent months positioning himself as the heir to Ronald Reagan's conservative movement. Recent poll data, however, show that his Democratic opponent perhaps better embodies some of Reagan's key personality traits.

In a survey that compares candidates with celebrities based on five character traits--namely, how articulate, intelligent, confident, experienced and influential they are perceived to be--Barack Obama's second-closest match was Reagan. In fact, the two politicians share identical or near-identical ratings on intelligence and confidence.

In Pictures: Barack Obama's Celebrity Counterparts

In Pictures: John McCain's Celebrity Counterparts

The polling that led to the data was conducted by California-based E-Poll Market Research, which each month surveys 1,100 voting-age men and women nationwide. Each person in the sample is given a list of 46 attributes and is asked to say which of these traits he or she believes applies to a given celebrity or presidential candidate. The sample population is also asked whether they recognize an individual and, in the case of the candidates, whether they would consider that person an appealing choice for president.

But while most respondents label both Obama and Reagan as confident and intelligent, the attribute on which they differ most highlights a different issue that already has dogged the presumptive Democratic nominee: experience.

The Illinois senator not only lagged behind Reagan by 25 percentage points in that category, but nine other celebrities whom the poll found most similar to Obama with respect to the five character traits--a group that includes TV comedians Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart--also scored higher on experience. Forty-seven percent of respondents, on the other hand, considered McCain experienced.

On the flip side of experience, Obama's youth appeal was substantial during the months of Democratic primaries, when he consistently drew scores of college-aged voters to the ballot box. This support remains strong, according to poll data, and becomes stronger as the voters get younger. If Obama were running, say, for student council president of a U.S. high school, he'd win in a landslide. Over three-quarters of the 13- to 17-year-old demographic--Obama's strongest backers by age--gave the candidate favorable ratings.

But just as Obama's support grows among the lower rungs of the age ladder, it weakens toward the top, as respondents possess progressively more of what could be called life experience.

This tapering of support and Obama's persistent experience deficit, even after months in the limelight of the primary dogfight, suggest that the McCain campaign should emphasize the contrast between his decades of congressional experience and Obama's less than four years' tenure. But the Republicans will have to tread carefully, for experience is a double-edged sword.

Though Obama's personality traits align with those of America's quintessential elder president, Reagan is somewhat of an aberration on his list of celebrity alter egos. The median for Obama's celebrity matches is 54, a number that reflects the candidate's relative youth.

McCain's celebrity counterparts, on the other hand, are more toward the septuagenarian. None is younger than 54, and their median age is 67.5, a figure not as advanced as McCain's own age, 73. That, if elected, he would be the oldest person to assume the presidency has not escaped the notice of his detractors.

The conventional wisdom that change is what's prized in this election certainly has support. Over 80% of voters say the country is on the wrong track, according to a June 17 poll conducted by *The Washington Post* and ABC News.

But changing direction requires more than just ideas. It demands execution, and Obama's challenge will be to prove that his political inexperience will not hinder his efficacy. He weathered such attacks from Hillary Clinton's campaign, in part by accusing her of inflating her own involvement in decision making during her husband's presidency. That jab left a mark, but it's unlikely to work against someone with 25 years' experience in Congress.

McCain's challenge is at least as difficult; the "oldest president" label will be tough to shake. He must persuade voters that he is energetic enough to lead the nation. To do that, he might want to study the person whose "oldest" title he would usurp.

Asked in a 1984 presidential debate whether age was an issue in the campaign, Reagan, who had faced questions about his ability to handle the job in his 70s, deftly diffused the barb.

"I will not make age an issue in this campaign," he quipped. "I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience."

So what if, in intelligence and confidence, Reagan's personality mirrors Obama's? Celebrity match or not, it seems McCain can still take some pointers from his iconic Republican predecessor.

In Pictures: Barack Obama's Celebrity Counterparts

In Pictures: John McCain's Celebrity Counterparts