

Racial, religious prejudice hurt Obama in WV

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This story examines some of the reasons that Clinton beat Obama so easily in West Virginia.

Transcript Piece Description

Senator Barack Obama suffered his biggest defeat yet in West Virginia's primary election Tuesday, and the state's image is taking a hit because of interviews like this: Daniels: Well, it's his name that messes me up, that Muslim name. Them Muslims, they're a terrorist, buddy, they almost want to be a terrorist. Sale : Barack Obama is actually Christian. Daniels: Yeah, he says he is? Studio lead 2: That's James Daniels of Logan County talking earlier this month with reporter Anna Sale. Reporters found lots of voters like Daniels, who believe Obama is some sort of "secret Muslim," despite all evidence to the contrary. Race was another big factor in the primary. In exit polls, one in five white voters said race played a role their decision ? and more than 80 percent of those supported Clinton. The Democratic primary shined a spotlight onto West Virginia -- and what it revealed isn't pretty. Scott Finn and Anna Sale report. Finn: First, there's his middle name. Mosley: Barack Hussein Obama. They don't like for us to say his middle name, but it is his name. Finn: Voters like Peggy Mosley of Logan County keep bringing it up -- even Obama supporters, like this young woman at an Obama rally in Beckley two months ago. Woman at rally: And I've also heard people make comments about you and your name and stuff like that. And my personal opinion, regardless of your name, I think you'd be a great president of this country. Finn: Obama grabbed the opportunity to make a point: Obama: That's a great question. First of all, let me clear something up, because there are so many rumors flying around. Let's be clear about this. I'm a Christian, and I pray to Jesus Christ our Savior. And I've been doing it for many, many years. Never been another religion, so when people send around e-mails, all they're trying to do is the usual political nonsense. And I think that is something people should be very clear about. Finn: So Obama says he's not a Muslim, he was never a Muslim. Every reputable news organization says the same. But that's not what the some e-mails say. They claim that Obama is really a Muslim because his Kenyan father was. Yes, his Kenyan father was born a Muslim --- but by the time Obama was born, he no longer practiced Islam and besides, he exited Obama's life when he was two. The e-mails also say Obama attended a "radical Madrassa" when he and his mother lived in Indonesia. Actually, he spent one year at a local public school, and three years at a Catholic one. But none of that matters to voters like Martin Hunt, a disabled coal miner from Logan County speaking here to reporter Anna Sale. Hunt: There's no way under the heavens I'd vote for Obama, because of his beliefs. I'm a born again Christian, and he's of the Muslim faith or whatever. From what I understand, he don't believe in God, and we don't need nobody to ruin our country who don't believe in God. Sale : He's actually Christian. Hunt: Well, he says he is, but? Sale : You don't believe him. Hunt: There's been some things come up, sort of put doubts in our minds. Finn: Comments like this one helped West Virginia make "The Daily Show" on Comedy Central Wednesday night. Here's host Jon Stewart: Stewart: But it would be obviously simplistic to suggest that this is just about race.

Young woman: He's a Muslim, and that has a lot to do with it. Older woman: And I don't like the Hussein thing. I've had enough of Hussein. Stewart: I think now I understand West Virginia's state slogan: West Virginia, no interviews please. Finn: But it's no laughing matter for Muslims like Dr. Faisal Khan of Charleston. Khan: So to put it bluntly, how does it make me feel as a West Virginian Muslim when I hear people accuse him, accuse him of being a Muslim, as if that is an accusation? I find it hurtful and I find it downright ignorant. Finn: Khan says the animosity he hears in these interviews doesn't match with his own experience in West Virginia. Khan: I would have to say I was surprised. Because I have lived in West Virginia for the last eight years, and I have experienced the warmth and generosity of the people of West Virginia. They may not know a lot about me or where I come from or my religion. But everyone I have every met has made an effort to get to know me and my family. And I know all my Muslim friends have had pretty much the same experience. Finn: But it's not just religion at issue. There's also race. Exit polls from Tuesday show that 22% of voters admitted that race was a factor in their decision. For 8% of voters, race was the most important factor. And almost all those voters went for Clinton. Sometimes, voters say that they aren't racist ? but their friends and neighbors are. Here's Anna Sale again talking to Brian Blankenship, a Logan County barber. Blankenship: Well they're saying Hillary, and if Hillary don't, they're saying McCain. Sale : So they don't like Obama Blankenship: No Sale : And what are the reasons Blankenship: I'd say because he's black, most of them. Finn: And sometimes, voters have no problem saying it themselves. Cooper: You know I didn't vote for no colored. Sale: Who did you vote for? Cooper: What's her name? Sale : Clinton. Cooper: Clinton, yeah. Finn: That's Morris Cooper, an 80-year-old man from Lincoln County. In all these cases, the voters weren't asked about race ? they brought it up themselves. None of this surprises William Turner. He grew up in Harlan County, Kentucky, and is now chair of Appalachian Studies at Berea College. He says there's no one single factor that explains Obama's trouble with voters in Appalachia. It's his race, it's his name, it's his upbringing in far-off Indonesia and Hawaii. And Obama's message of change, which is so popular elsewhere, doesn't resonate in a region that resists change. Turner: How often I heard it said, Nobody likes change but a baby with a dirty diaper. So this kind of change is maybe just a little too much for people to absorb. Finn: Some people think Obama can turn these attitudes around if he spends more time in West Virginia. In 1960, John F. Kennedy crisscrossed the state for three weeks, and even went down into a coal mine. It paid off ? the mostly Protestant state helped select the nation's first Catholic president. But Turner says Obama has a much tougher job than Kennedy. Turner: I don't think Barack could have in the short time he had change these long-standing stereotypes of black people or Appalachia. So what we need is just more education, more interaction, people getting to know each other better. And if he did nothing else but held up a mirror so we see ourselves better than we did last week, that's good that he did that. Finn: West Virginians, and other people in Appalachia, complain a lot about unfair stereotypes. But in this case, Turner says we have no one but ourselves to blame. For West Virginia Public Broadcasting, I'm Scott Finn in Charleston.