



A few months ago, you made an X, drew a line, flipped a switch, or otherwise indicated which candidate you wanted to see in the White House. Whichever you did, you helped make a first.

Would the next Pennsylvania Avenue resident be the first African American president, or would he govern with the first woman VP? Were you mourning because your candidate wouldn't be the first woman president? Or did you cast your vote elsewhere, thus making history by not voting for a first-time history-maker?

In the new book “The Breakthrough”, author Gwen Ifill examines race and gender in the 2008 election, and how it changed the political landscape forever.

When Barack Obama won the primary in Iowa in 2006, people who marched in Selma and protested in Birmingham were surprised. Few – politician or otherwise – ever thought they'd see a black man win an overwhelmingly white state in a race for the highest office in the land.

But this should have come as no surprise; it was almost inevitable. Younger-generation African American politicians had been making their marks for years. Those men and women didn't live through race riots and Jim Crow laws, but “lived in a world shaped by access instead of denial”. Through them, the times, they were a-changin'.

Still, the rift between old Civil-Rights-era lions and new Gen-X cubs is deep, Ifill says, and it can be wide even within families. Witness the Jackson family: Jesse Sr. was heard muttering insults toward Barack Obama (and subsequently apologized), while Jesse Jr. threw himself wholeheartedly behind the Obama candidacy.

Add gender to the mix, and things get muddier. Many African Americans supported Hillary Clinton for myriad reasons. Though Obama won an overwhelming amount of liberal white votes, “...black voters remained skeptical for months,” says Ifill. Clinton supporters were often supporters because they were anti-Obama.

But is racism at the root of this convolution? Ifill says that it definitely was an issue in the 2008 election, on both sides. Some whites were confused because Obama “did not fit the corrosive stereotype of what a black man was supposed to be.” Some African Americans questioned if Obama was “black enough”.

Ifill quotes Congressman Kendrick Meek who says that “Black folk... want to know that the

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people they elect... have not forgotten their roots.”

“Breakthrough” is, as a political examination, a bit of a conundrum. Author Gwen Ifill interviewed a great number of African American politicians to get a wide view of the Old Guard versus the Newcomers in Washington.

White politicians on the subjects of race and gender were scarce.

Yes, this is a book about “breakthroughs” in African American politics, but a sprinkling from “the other side” might’ve sparked more dialogue on this timely and important subject.

Though it meanders occasionally and though Ifill often says the same thing ten times, I think “The Breakthrough” is a fascinating look at an era of change within an era of change. If you’re a fan of politics or a student of racial relations, look toward this book first.

“The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama” by Gwen Ifill

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