

OBAMANASTICS

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What is onomastically remarkable about Barack Obama's name? If one sets A=1, B=2, ... Z=26, adds the numerical version ($2+1+18+1+3+11+15+2+1+13+1 = 68$), and divides by the number of letters (11), one obtains a "density" of 6.2.

So what? Although statistics are difficult to come by, there may be no more than one person in a thousand with a density this low. Consider the population of 42 names to which Obama aspires, those of United States presidents. The table below presents them in order of decreasing density:

Woodrow Wilson 15.8, Ulysses Grant 15.0
Harry Truman 14.8, John Tyler 14.1
Lyndon Johnson 13.8, Rutherford Hayes 13.6
Chester Arthur 13.4, Zachary Taylor 13.3, Theodore Roosevelt 13.0
Franklin Roosevelt 12.7
Martin Van Buren & Andrew Jackson 12.3, Herbert Hoover 12.2, Dwight Eisenhower 12.0
George Washington 11.7, James Monroe & Thomas Jefferson 11.6
Richard Nixon and John Kennedy 11.4, James Polk 11.3, William McKinley 11.0
Grover Cleveland 10.9, Warren Harding 10.8, George Bush (2 men) 10.7, Benjamin Harrison & William Clinton & Millard Fillmore & Andrew Jackson 10.6
James Carter & James Madison 10.3, William Harrison 10.2, Franklin Pierce 10.1
William Taft 9.8, Ronald Reagan 9.7
Calvin Coolidge & John Adams (2 men) 9.4, Gerald Ford 9.0
Abraham Lincoln 8.8, James Buchanan 8.6
James Garfield 8.5

The median (middle value) of this population is between 11.0 and 10.9, and the standard deviation is approximately 1.8; clearly, one must extrapolate far beyond the presidents to evaluate the unbearable lightness of Obama. Is he one in a hundred? in a thousand? The surname Obama has a density of 6.4; among the 500 most common Social Security surnames, only Black 5.8, Dean 6.0, Beck 5.3, Blake 6.2 and Cobb 5.5 are less dense. However, Obama's first name Barack, with a density of only 6.0, contributes even more greatly to his lightness. In fact, there are very few common given names this weightless: Adam 4.75, Chad 4.0, Ed 4.5, Adelia 5.3, Diana 5.8.

So here is a challenge for the computer-literate Word Ways reader: calculate the densities of at least several thousand random names and report the fraction under 6.4. Because extremely short names are more likely to produce extremely small densities (I personally know an Ed Beck with density of 5.0), sample only those names at least as long as Barack Obama. I conjecture that he is a man in a thousand!