

Black voters nix Republicans

by *Bill Berkowitz*

While Black voters continue to reject the Republican Party, conservative Black ministers such as Bishop Harry R. Jackson are looking to Black mega-churches for GOP converts

Despite the calculated outreach efforts by the Bush Administration, spearheaded by Ken Mehlman, the former head of the Republican National Committee, to turn the Black vote, exit polling from the 2006 election showed that close to 90 percent of Black voters stayed firmly with Democratic Party candidates.

And, although the GOP fielded what they thought were several attractive Black candidates for state-wide races around the country -- former Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver Lynn Swann ran for governor in Pennsylvania, Maryland lieutenant governor Michael Steele contended for that state's vacated Senate seat, and Ohio's Secretary of State, and longtime party activist, Kenneth Blackwell was that state's GOP gubernatorial candidate -- the Party failed to win any of those contests. (Swann received 13 percent of the Black vote; Steele received 25 percent; and Ohio's Blackwell received only 20 percent of the Black vote.)

Once again the GOP failed to gain traction within the Black community.

"The Black vote played a critical role in the outcome of a number of closely contested elections, especially for the U.S. Senate," David A. Bositis pointed out in a report titled "Blacks and the 2006 Midterm Elections." Bositis, a Senior Research Associate at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, noted that while national turnout of Black voters was "up slightly" from the 2002 midterm elections, "it was strategically effective in several places, although not enough in others."

According to Bositis, "Black voters were important in electing a Democratic governor (Ohio) and reelecting three Democratic governors (Michigan, Pennsylvania and Tennessee) and two Democratic senators (Florida and Michigan)...More important... Black voters were critical in electing four new U.S. Democratic Senators in Missouri, Virginia, Ohio and Pennsylvania..."

Despite these failures, the battle for Black votes will continue; the chief battleground over the next decade will be the Black churches.

GOP tries to build a Black conservative infrastructure

Regardless of how many supportive columns Black conservatives Walter Williams, Thomas Sowell, Star Parker, John McWhorter, LaShawn Barber and Larry Elder write; how much money talk show host and syndicated columnist Armstrong Williams gathered up from the Bush administration for touting its policies; multiple appearances by Black conservative "spokespersons" on conservative radio and cable television's talk shows; large amounts of right wing foundation money poured into creating and sustaining Black conservative organizations; invitations extended to conservative Black clergy to White House gatherings; and Mehlman-authored apologies for the party's racist policies -- including Nixon's Southern Strategy and the infamous Willie Horton advertisement-- the Republican Party continues to be unable to win significant numbers of Black votes.

2006 was earmarked by Republican leaders as a pivotal year for turning the Black vote back to its Republican Party roots; building on the 2004 election when socially conservative Black voters in Ohio and Florida helped put George W. Bush over the top. While Bush received slightly more Black votes than he did in 2000 (up 2 points to 11 percent), in Florida, support among Blacks rose six percentage points to 13 percent, and in Ohio, the president may have snared as much as 16 percent of the Black vote.

For close to two decades, while conservative foundations have been spending a substantial amount of dough creating and sponsoring a host of Black organizations, and conservative media outlets have given over significant amounts of space and airtime to conservative Black pundits, at the same time Republican Party leaders have been forecasting a shift in voting patterns in the Black community.

Gridlock for Black conservative organizations?

One prominent Black conservative organization is Project 21, an initiative of the Washington, DC-based National Center for Public Policy Research (NCPFR). Project 21 was set up in 1992 "to promote the views of African-Americans whose entrepreneurial spirit, dedication to family and commitment to individual responsibility has not traditionally been echoed by the nation's civil rights establishment," according to its website.

A recent survey for CNN -- conducted by Opinion Research Corp. -- of 328 Blacks and 703 whites found that 84 percent of Blacks and 66 percent of whites considered racism a "very serious" or "somewhat serious" problem, and 51 percent of Blacks and 26 percent of whites claim to have "been a victim of discrimination." Percentages were lower when people were asked if they knew anyone who was "racially biased," with only 31 percent of Blacks and 21 percent of whites saying they did. Only 12 percent of Blacks and 13 percent of whites surveyed further admitted to being racially-biased themselves.

"I think all of this had a predetermined outcome, needing only anecdotal comments to lend a veneer of credibility," said Project 21 Chairman Mychal Massie in a press release issued December 14. "The CNN report serves only one purpose, and that is to convince the public at large - specifically white people - that they are evil racists. It is a vulgar exercise to try to find racism in the fiber of every white."

"Racism is based on ignorance. Hard work, perseverance and accomplishments on the part of individuals can evaporate racial bias," Project 21 Fellow Deneen Moore pointed out.

There are a host of Black conservative organizations committed to moving Blacks into the Republican Party:

The Alliance of Black Republicans chaired by Kim M. Hoppe, aims "to increase participation of the Black American community in the Republican Party."

The National Black Republican Association defines its mission as being "a resource for the Black community

on Republican ideals and [to] promote the traditional values of the Black community which are the core values of the Republican Party: strong families, faith in God, personal responsibility, quality education, and equal opportunities for all."

The United Black Republican Coalition, chaired by Alfonzo A. Maxwell, aims "to increase the number of Blacks voting Republican by generating and supporting candidates across the nation who are committed to making a positive difference in African American Communities."

Republicans for Black Empowerment lists "three broad goals": "foster fresh political dialogue in the Black community"; "develop Black Republican leadership;" and "improve the lives of Americans."

African American Republican Leadership Council says its mission "is to break the liberal democrat stranglehold over Black America," and it calls itself "the only national campaign to raise and increase African American support for common sense Reaganite Republican public policies and candidates from a nominal 14 to a strategic target of 25 percent."

Black America's Political Action Committee describes itself as an "unaffiliated non-partisan Political Action Committee" whose "candidates are committed to supporting our common sense approach to public policy and politics: promoting Social Security reform, improving public education, expanding economic opportunities to historically disadvantaged sectors in America, vigorously promoting equality for all Americans, protecting the sanctity of human life and restoring moral values and the importance of family in our communities."

GOP takes battle for votes to Black churches

After the election, Virginia's Bishop Gerald O. Glenn, the pastor of the 2,500-member New Deliverance Evangelistic Church, was unapologetic about his support of incumbent Senator George Allen. He told his mostly Democratic Party-supporting congregation that he was proud to have supported the Allen -- who lost a close race to Democrat James Webb -- despite Allen's checkered past around issues of race; an issue that was magnified by the Senator's "macaca" remark during the campaign.

"Political pundits and, of course, Black Democrats would say Glenn's endorsement of Allen was simple opportunism," reporters Scott Bass, Amy Biegelsen and Chris Dovi recently wrote in an issue of Richmond, Virginia's Style Weekly dated November 29 -- December 6. "Glenn clearly thought Allen would win, and therefore decided to jump into the fray and position himself and his cause at the forefront of Allen's image makeover. State Sen. Benjamin J. Lambert III, one of Richmond's highest-ranking Black Democrats, said he did the same in the name of funding for Black colleges."

"There is some opportunism going on," the Rev. Dwight C. Jones, pastor of First Baptist Church South Richmond, and a Democrat in the House of Delegates, told Style. "I think that they thought [Allen] was going to pull it out and be able to get the spoils from it -- and it was mistake."

Pastor Glenn is one of a number of Black pastors who have changed party allegiances over the past few years.

These days, Bishop Harry R. Jackson Jr., of New Hope Christian Church in Maryland and president of the High Impact Leadership Coalition, is probably the most visible ally of the Christian Right. People for the American Way's Right Wing Watch pointed out that "Since joining forces with the far Right -- including membership in the influential Arlington Group -- Jackson has been a frequent spokesman for right-wing causes. He spoke at the 'Justice Sunday: Stopping the Filibuster Against People of Faith' religious rally in support of Bush's extreme judicial nominees" and 'Justice Sunday II', as well as at the Family Research Council's "Values Voter Summit" this past September.

Jackson was a featured speaker at the summer 2005's "Justice Sunday II -- God Save the United States and This Honorable Court!" Sponsored by the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family, and simulcast nationally, Jackson, who supported George W. Bush in his re-election bid in 2004, told the crowd: "I believe that what God is doing today is calling the Black church to team with the white evangelical church and the Catholic Church and people of moral conscience, and in this season we need to begin to tell both [political] parties, 'Listen, it's our way or the highway.'"

After the 2006 election, during which he endorsed Maryland's Michael Steele and Ohio's Ken Blackwell, Jackson remained enthusiastic about the possibilities of the white Christian evangelical/ Black religious alliance. In a two-part column -- posted at TownHall.com November 20 and 27 -- titled "Black Power: The New Conservative Stronghold" Jackson maintained that the coming two years before the 2008 presidential election offers a great opportunity for "wise conservatives to build bridges with the leaders of the 'new Black church'":

These church leaders are classical social conservatives. They believe that government programs alone cannot stop crime, poverty, or poor schools. The new Black church is not waiting for a handout. They are promoting immediate change through wiser, biblically-informed choices and personal accountability.

They are using a new brand of Black power to transform the nation. These men and women all believe that they can change America because of their faith in personal transformation (through religious conversion) and community transformation (through education and economic development). White conservatives, especially evangelical Christians, must learn new methods to advance their agenda; if they are going to protect America against a liberal deluge of poor policies and laws. The chief instrument in their tool kit will be bridge building and coalition formation.

Jackson, the author of "The Warriors Heart: Rules of Engagement for the Spiritual War Zone," cited three emerging church leaders -- Dr. Floyd Flake of New York, Pastor James Meeks of Chicago, and Bishop Eddie Long of Atlanta -- all of whom have churches with 14,000 members or more and "represent a 'civil rights' revolution that is very compatible with the tenants of the conservative movement."

Jackson argued that while "These kinds of churches can change the landscape of American politics and help both parties come back to the moral center," they are "not alone in the positive contribution they are making to the nation." One thing they have in common wrote Jackson is that "they have rejected the rhetoric of Jessie Jackson and Al Sharpton, but they do not yet feel welcomed into the conservative movement's ranks.

"The images which David Kuo sets forth in "Tempting Faith" articulate their fears. Despite all the nay-sayers, bold Black, entrepreneurial leaders are willing to give new coalitions a try."

In a follow-up column titled "Why the Liberal Media Will Lose in '08" (December 11), Jackson suggested that "The national message of the liberals was simply that the current administration could not be trusted to protect them internally or domestically." Liberals also used an old strategy where they "attempt to tell a minority or special interest group that they cannot make it on their own."

Liberals "suggest that a larger more powerful group is out to get them ... [and they] imply that people have to stay with 'their group.'" No matter how far they could have gone individually. It is implied that they will never outgrow identification with their group. This liberal approach can dredge up xenophobic fears and create an 'us-versus-them' mentality that is not easy to shake."

As the 110th Congress gets underway, due to the Democratic Party's victory, members of the Congressional Black Caucus -- Democrats all -- have become chairmen of several significant committees; others have taken the reins of a number of congressional subcommittees.

This new alignment presents members of the Congressional Black Caucus with a historic opportunity to raise issues of major import to underserved communities. If they are successful, it could again thwart the GOP's goal of bringing black voters to the fold.