

Message to Giuliani and Romney: Just say no to drive-by politics

by Marc_H._Morial

In November, the National Urban League extended invitations to anyone considering a presidential run to speak at our annual conference this July in St. Louis. We figured they'd have no legitimate excuse not to come if we started our outreach two years before Election Day. Well, we were wrong.

After two rounds of invitations, we've received two rejections - from former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney. Giuliani has got some bigger fish to fry, apparently, and is so busy that he's got not just one but two scheduling conflicts that render him unable to grace our stage. I understand the 2008 presidential campaign is already under way - well before elections of the past - but it's not as if we're holding our convention in the middle of the primary season.

Such is the life of a popular presidential contender such as Giuliani, who emerged as the GOP front-runner in a recent Washington Post poll that gave him a 2-to-1 advantage over Arizona Sen. John McCain. I understand our friend Rudy is being forced to make tough decisions and prioritize. But apparently, the National Urban League doesn't rank up there on his list. Romney barely registered 4 percent in the Post poll, which leads me to conclude that his campaign will be on life support or long gone by our conference in July. But that is no excuse.

As Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., and Barack Obama, D-Ill., jostle for the black vote, Giuliani and Romney appear to have written us off even though their party's sitting leader - President George W. Bush - saw fit to include us on his calendar - not just once but three times since he took office in 2001. Bush boycotted the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 2004, but not the Urban League. His latest visit - in 2004 - featured a debate between him and Democratic presidential nominee Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass.

In 2006, then-Republican National Committee chairman Ken Mehlman and Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean appeared. But in 2007, we know one thing is for sure: Giuliani and Romney won't be around. Or so they've told us.

Giuliani might have served as mayor of New York City, but that doesn't mean he's obliged to address the

issues near and dear to his former constituents' hearts. It's so ironic that America's Mayor would turn down an invitation to speak in front of the nation's largest organization devoted to urban issues. But then again, he cannot possibly depend on us to pull him through to victory in the GOP primaries. He needs to do what every other red-blooded political candidate seems required to do - court white evangelicals, an increasingly influential and populous sector of the electorate. In 2006, they made up 24 percent of the electorate, up from 23 percent in 2004, according to exit polls.

In the height of the 2006 midterm elections, the media surmised that the Republican Party was losing its grip over white evangelicals. Their predictions, to a large extent, didn't quite live up to expectations: 71 percent of white evangelicals surveyed in exit polls supported the GOP, down from 78 percent in 2004. For just a quarter of the voting population, they surely have a big voice. It seems that both parties are bending over backward too much to appease this sector of the electorate. McCain knows a few things about inflaming evangelicals when he took them to task in the 2000 Virginia GOP primary, where they proved to be the nail in the coffin of his presidential run. The irony is that a higher percentage of blacks compared to whites attend church at least once a week or more - 37 percent versus 25 percent, according to a 2004 National Opinion Research Center poll. So, we're not talking about two groups that have absolutely nothing in common.

Minorities made up 20 percent of voters on Election Day 2006 - 10 percent African-American, 8 percent Latino and 2 percent Asian, according to exit polls. By the end of this century, there will be no majority ethnic group in the United States. So, future political leaders must take everyone's opinions into account if they want to lead our nation effectively. The days of white men governing a mostly white population are over. I realize that blacks tend to support Democrats but does that mean Republicans like Giuliani and Romney should write us off so early in the campaign? The Democratic presidential contenders must also realize that our support is not a given.

Giuliani's courageous performance on Sept. 11 won him well-deserved worldwide acclaim and media attention but he is sadly mistaken if he thinks he can ride those war-on-terrorism coattails all the way to the Oval Office. According to a recent Pew Center poll, more than 60 percent of Americans believed that the nation was losing ground on an assortment of domestic issues: the budget deficit, the income gap and health care. Those were followed by moral issues - with 55 percent expressing concern. Obviously, the American public has other things on their minds than whether gays should be allowed to marry or whether Americans should be permitted to burn Old Glory. Interestingly enough, only 38 percent of those polled by Pew believed that we were losing ground with regards to international terrorism.

Do you get a feeling of deja vu here? I do. Think back to 1992 when maverick presidential contender H. Ross Perot centered his entire campaign around the federal deficit issue that resulted in steering some likely Republicans into the Independent column on Election Day. That, much to President George Herbert Walker

Bush's chagrin, paved the way for the victory of Bill Clinton, whose handlers coined the political slogan - "It's the economy, stupid" - and ingrained it into the American consciousness. Giuliani risks repeating history much like Bush if he ignores domestic issues and fails to reach out to the American electorate that cares about them.

And let me also add that Clinton, Obama, McCain and the rest are hardly off the hook. We haven't heard from them, either. But at least, they haven't written us off. If the head of the Republican Party - George W. Bush - can find time to come, why not Giuliani or Romney?

The National Urban League promotes issues that are just as important to middle-class Republican NASCAR dads as to single black mothers. All Americans want to get better jobs, own their own homes, send their children to college and prepare for their own retirement. Our message of economic empowerment is universal: It cuts across all lines. Everyone has a desire to make their lives better for themselves and future generations.

That is why I'm urging our presidential contenders to cease and desist with the practice of drive-by politicking. To be an effective president of this nation in the 21st century, they'll need to reach out to all groups equally. They cannot just drive by and wave. To ensure a better future for our nation, they'll have to engage a wide range of viewpoints no matter what kind of bang they think they'll get for their campaign buck on Election Day. So, Rudy and Mitt, I urge you to reconsider - not just for us but for the future of the United States.

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