

Black vote takes center stage

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Black America must be more vocal and active in lobbying for its agenda with both major political parties, according to a bi-partisan panel discussion on Thursday during the 97th annual National Urban League Conference in St. Louis.

The panel centered on the questions of whether black voters and issues of importance to the black community will be ignored during the 2008 presidential campaign.

"No candidate and no president will do any more than we make them do," said panelist Rev. Al Sharpton.

"Every constituency, except blacks, requires a candidate to address whatever its issues are seriously. Too many of us, in both parties, apologize for standing up for our community."

Joe Watkins, a Republican strategist, said, "if (black people) want to be taken seriously, there has to be some drama."

"(Black people) should not be so predictable in our voting pattern."

Columnist Dwayne Wickham responded to Watkins' plea for black votes on behalf of the GOP by saying, "it is OK to be predictable in voting patterns if the candidates support the core values of your interest."

Shannon Reeves, chair of the Republican national Committee African

American Leadership Council, said he would use his newly appointed position to help bridge the divide between the GOP and African Americans.

"What's important for black voters to know is that I am a black Republican - not a Republican who is black," he said.

"I'm sure there are black people in both parties who don't want to be associated with our community."

Paul Brathwaite, political commentator and entrepreneur, said the key to not having votes taken for granted "is to be involved in every issue."

"We have to ask 'where is our part of this?' on all issues.

NUL President Marc Morial moderated the panel and asked Tara Wall, director of the RNC office of public affairs, why Republican candidates' campaigns lack diversity.

She said, "strides are being made" to make campaigns more inclusive and also throughout the Republican Party.

"I'm working to make sure our campaigns are diverse. It's early. What you see now may not be the whole picture."

She said Democrats have in the past "put up wallpaper out there right before the election," and she is bringing the message to black voters that "we have options, we have choices.

Sharpton criticized the candidates who turned down invitations to take part in a panel on Friday, July 27.

"I wish more GOP candidates had showed up. Those that don't show up for this competition need to be punished," he said.



National Urban League President Marc Morial made his keynote address Wednesday evening in St. Louis, Missouri during the organizations national conference. Morial spoke on topics from early childhood education to housing. Photo by Wiley Price/ St. Louis American Newspaper