

Dem. Pres. hopefuls speaking to Urban League

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Panelists at the National Urban League's forum on the black vote share a laugh while voicing their opinions.

(Robert Cohen /P-D)

ST. LOUIS -- Four Democratic presidential candidates are now speaking to a standing-room-only crowd at the America's Center for the national conference of the Urban League.

The forum began at 9:10 a.m. this morning with Rep. Dennis Kucinich and then followed by Sen. John Edwards, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sen. Barack Obama. While the league has said that it will not endorse a candidate, it had invited all presidential candidates -- Republican and Democrat -- to address its convention.

At 9:10 a.m., Kucinich was first to take the stage. The forum would allow each of the four candidates 20 minutes to speak, followed by questions from the league's two top officers.

Kucinich told the crowd that he could "feel the energy in the crowd," and told them that it was very important that he be there to share his vision for America's future.

At 9:40 a.m., Edwards took the stage and told the league members that there are two America's -- one for the rich and powerful, another for the poor. He blamed what he called a "broken Washington" on politicians who listen to lobbyists, who get what they want. And he said because of that, the average American cannot get their issues addressed -- healthcare and other pressing concerns.

"Washington is broken," Edwards said. "It's not working the way it needs to work. It's rigged, broken and not working."

Edwards said that he would take on the system and stop the rigging of what happens in Washington by making the average citizen's concerns addressed, not those of the powerful lobbyists.

About 10:05 a.m., Clinton began telling the crowd that she was incensed by the idea that anyone has given up on the young, black, inner-city youths -- so many who have wound up in prison because of economic and societal ills. She said that the nation had to do something now "to end a moral crisis" and a "national crisis" and to stop the bloodshed and allow them to "fall between the cracks."

"I am focused on the need to help children succeed," Clinton said. "We need to roll up our sleeves and act like Americans again... (and) work together to solve these problems."

"What will you do to end this crisis? We need a smart, bold, comprehensive approach.... I still believe it takes a village to raise a child," Clinton said to rousing applause.

ST. LOUIS — To hear the talk at this week's National Urban League conference, the only choice facing many black voters in 2008 may be which Democratic presidential candidate to support.

At issue is whether to blame politics or policies for an undeniable fact: For decades, black voters have overwhelmingly cast ballots for Democrats.

The upshot will be on display today when only Democratic hopefuls for the White House — Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Sen. Barack Obama, former Sen. John Edwards and Rep. Dennis Kucinich — will be on stage at the candidate forum. They'll be facing a predominantly black crowd of thousands from around the country, gathered in St. Louis for the league's four-day conference, which ends Saturday.

No Republican presidential candidates are participating. Two lesser-known hopefuls who had to been slated to appear — former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and Rep. Duncan Hunter of California — dropped out at the last minute, citing congressional votes or miscommunication.

On Thursday, black Republican and Democratic activists debated whether African-American voters were getting the political attention they deserve — and the policy answers they need — before casting their votes.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, a Democrat, called for black voters to confront both political parties and "press them to come out with some serious, thought-out policies" on the economy, health care and education.

The Rev. Joseph Watkins, a Republican, called for African-Americans to break away from their traditional voting patterns and pay more attention to GOP candidates who may better reflect their conservative views on social issues such as abortion and gay marriage.

On issues such as health care, the partisan positions were stark. Sharpton and other Democratic panelists called for some sort of universal health care to ensure all Americans basic coverage. Republican commentator Tara Wall called that approach "socialized medicine" and said a market approach was the best way to expand coverage while keeping costs down.

Urban League President Marc Morial, who served as moderator, said he was concerned that "not one candidate in either party has talked about black business arrangements and consultants."

If a political campaign doesn't have high-level black aides or black consultants, Morial asked, doesn't that send a signal about the racial makeup of that candidate's presidential administration?

In the audience, several said they were pleased to hear such a discussion. "I think it's so important that we drill down deep into the issues," said Deirdre Johnson, an official with the Urban League of Greater New Orleans.

But several in the audience also agreed with the panelists in both parties that it's tough for Republicans to present their policy alternatives to black voters if there's a perception that the GOP politically doesn't care.

Both sides lamented the failure of any Republican presidential hopefuls to appear at today's forum — or at earlier conventions of other predominantly black groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

"It's insulting," Sharpton said, and called on black voters to "punish" Republicans for the lack of attention.

Sharpton contended black voters believe that Republicans don't care about them, leaving blacks no choice but to support Democratic candidates.

"When I was in high school, I may not have gone to the prom with the girl I wanted, but with the girl I could get," Sharpton said.

Wall replied that Republican candidates will make serious appeals to black voters when the 2008 election gets closer.

But she agreed that the GOP no-shows at the Urban League looked bad. "I think all the candidates should be here, on both sides," Wall said.

Urban League officials lamented the last-minute cancellations. Hunter cited last-minute votes in Washington, while Huckabee's staff blamed miscommunication and a scheduling conflict.

Huckabee sought to smooth over any rifts by announcing that he planned to fly to St. Louis for a Thursday night meeting with league leaders. But a league spokesman said no such meeting was planned, noting a number of political receptions and Democratic fundraising events on tap.

Also Thursday, conferees heard a panel discussion on another topic important to African-Americans: black males.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson said the nation has yet to provide equality of opportunity for blacks if young men, especially those from backgrounds of poverty, are to have a fair chance at success.

"Why are we good at basketball and football ... things that are very difficult?" he asked. "When the rules are public, when the playing field is even and the goals are clear, we do pretty good."