

No GOP hopefuls on Urban League slate so far

By Stephen Deere

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

07/13/2007

They received their invitations back in November, before some had even announced their intention to seek the presidency.

But with less than two weeks to go, not one of the 10 Republican presidential candidates has accepted the opportunity to take the stage at the National Urban League's annual conference.

"We began sending these letters out before anyone could begin to have a scheduling conflict," said Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League.

The invitations went out to both Democrats and Republicans, asking them to participate in separate presidential candidate forums on July 27 in St. Louis.

While Democratic front-runners Sens. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and former Sen. John Edwards said they will attend, the League can't get a firm commitment from a GOP presidential hopeful.

"I'm surprised," Morial said. "All the candidates have gotten two or three letters from us."

The top three Republican candidates — former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, Arizona Sen. John McCain and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney — already have said they aren't coming, citing scheduling conflicts or declining the invitations outright.

"The mayor will not be attending," said Elliott Bundy, a spokesman for Giuliani's campaign. "I don't have any more information."

In 1999, George W. Bush was the only Republican presidential candidate to speak at the conference, which provides a national stage for reaching black voters. He later returned in 2003 and again in 2004, when he and his Democratic opponent, John Kerry, both spoke.

This year, there are some indications the president may make an appearance. The U.S. Secret Service inquired about security matters, said Angelia Bills, a spokeswoman for the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis Inc.

White House spokesman Alex Conant said he didn't know whether the president would be attending, adding that Bush's schedule isn't made public that far in advance.

The Urban League is a nonpartisan civil rights organization based in New York that advocates on behalf of African-Americans. It does not endorse candidates and is viewed as a more moderate alternative for Republicans courting black voters than the NAACP, another national civil rights organization, which is traditionally seen as more liberal.

"I think (GOP candidates') decisions to not show up are gigantic mistakes," said Michael Fauntroy, author of "Republicans and the Black Vote." "The organization is less likely to be hostile to a Republican candidate."

Fauntroy sees the Urban League forum as a prime opportunity for Republicans to court African-American votes in a pivotal electoral state. The development appears to be a sign that GOP candidates may not make a serious attempt to engage African-American voters, he added.

"This is also their signal that they have no belief that they are going to win any amount of black votes," said Fauntroy, an assistant professor of public policy at George Mason University.

But perhaps they have some good reasons to think so, said Ron Walters, director of the African American Leadership Institute at the University of Maryland. Many blacks still resent the government's handling of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and most are opposed to the war in Iraq, he said.

"I think the problem they have is that the issues just aren't lining up, which makes it impossible to contend for this constituency," Walters said, adding that he still thinks it's a bad political move for GOP candidates to ignore the conference.

Morial is still hopeful one or two GOP candidates will speak at the forum. He said he is in discussions with a couple of campaigns, but declined to name them.

At the NAACP convention in Detroit this week, only one GOP candidate, Tom Tancredo, spoke, along with all eight Democratic candidates. Tancredo, a Colorado congressman, may still speak at the conference in St. Louis, said Alan Moore, a spokesman for his campaign.

"We haven't made a decision," Moore said. "We do have the invitation."

Meanwhile, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee has a private speaking engagement on July 27 and won't be attending, said Alice Stewart, a spokeswoman. Rep. Ron Paul of Texas and former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson also have scheduling conflicts that won't allow them to attend the forum, their campaigns said.

The campaigns of Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback, former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore and Rep. Duncan Hunter of California did not return phone and e-mail messages seeking comment.

The other five Democratic candidates also have not committed to participating in the forum.

Morial noted that Missouri is a swing state, meaning neither party dominates in

presidential elections. And unless St. Louis hosts a national debate, the forums may be the only time some Missouri voters will see the candidates up close and on the same stage.

Morial is baffled by the tepid Republican response.

"These elections are so marginal that a tilt of the 3 or 4 percent of the vote either way in a handful of states could change the outcome," he said.