

Sharpton criticizes GOP no-shows

By Cheryl Wittenauer

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The Rev. Al Sharpton speaks at the National Urban League conference today.
(Jeff Roberson/AP)

ST. LOUIS (AP) -- Black Republican political strategists today defended their party's expected no-shows at a presidential candidates' forum to be hosted by the National Urban League, saying black Americans shouldn't rule them out.

But national civil rights leader Al Sharpton said black voters should punish the GOP candidates, adding, "we can only assume you weren't courting us.

"Republicans have to lay out their policies and court the African-American vote. We need to have our interests debated in the market place," said Sharpton, noting there won't be another NAACP or Urban League conference before the presidential primaries.

"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," he said, suggesting Republicans leave black voters little choice but to vote for a Democrat.

Sharpton was among a panel of black leaders, political strategists, commentators and journalists who Thursday discussed the black vote in the 2008 presidential election at the Urban League's national conference here. An estimated 10,000 people are attending.

Five presidential candidates -- four Democrats and one Republican -- are scheduled to address the conference Friday. Republican Mike Huckabee's office said he cannot attend Friday but planned to meet board members tonight. The Urban League could not confirm any such meeting.

The candidates have been asked to frame their talks around the Urban League's top 10 policy priorities that were unveiled Wednesday night.

Those and 40 more to be released by year's end focus on child welfare, jobs, homeownership and entrepreneurship.

Urban League president Marc Morial said black voters deserve more than "drive-by politics and last-minute appeals to churches." But, he admitted, "sometimes we aren't good about getting out to vote." He said no candidate has talked about black economic development, which is the civil rights organization's major thrust.

"It's naive to assume any politician will fall on the sword of any constituency," Sharpton said. "We must press them."

Shannon Reeves said his role at the Republican National Committee is to get the party to understand the black community. "There are some in our party who don't want to associate with our community," he said to groans from the crowd.

Republican commentator Tara Wall, pressed to explain why none of the Republican presidential campaigns have named blacks in leadership roles, said some strides are being made, but "I will continue to challenge them and

Democrats."

USA Today columnist DeWayne Wickham discounted wins by New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, saying "gender still matters ... race still matters.

"If Obama was selected," he said, "that would bring great joy to the Republicans." But he said don't rule out 2004 vice presidential candidate John Edwards for the Democratic nomination.

"He's a sleeper and sometimes comes across as soft and weak," Wickham said. "But since 1964, no Democrat has been elected to the White House who didn't come from the South. Region still matters. If you can't crack the solid South, you won't win the presidency."

He said Sen. John McCain's support for the war will hurt him, while former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney is perceived as a "flip-flopper" on social issues. He predicted female voters will flock to the Democratic ticket to protest Rudy Giuliani if he gets the Republican nod, noting Giuliani's marital missteps while in office.

Wall fired back that the same standard should apply to Bill Clinton's marital failings in the White House. But Sharpton retorted to explosive applause, "This time Hillary is running, not Bill."

Republican political analyst, the Rev. Joe Watkins, said the Republican candidate to watch is Romney, who's got money and good poll numbers in early primary states.

"Then call him and tell him I've got a mike for him tomorrow" at the presidential forum, Morial said.