

Justice On Quotas? Political Parties Wrestle With A Hot Issue

WASHINGTON (AP) - The next presidential election will likely feature a heated debate over affirmative action. But one party will call it simple justice, the other will label it unfair quotas and voters will have to decide whom to believe.

Sen. Jesse Helms rode to reelection in North Carolina after accusing his black challenger, Democrat Harvey Gantt, of supporting racial quotas.

While some denounced the tactic, others detected a way to bolster the identity and electoral strength of the Republican Party.

"Helms came from 13 points behind to win comfortably, I think solely on this issue," said GOP consultant Roger Stone. "It is the kind of cutting social issue that conservatives need to hold onto the White House." A number of recent developments suggest voters may be hearing a lot more about affirmative action and racial quotas between now and November 1992: Democratic congressional leaders have renewed their pledge to once again pass a civil rights bill that President Bush branded a quota bill and vetoed in the last Congress.

Virginia Gov. Doug Wilder, the only Democrat blatantly testing the 1992 presidential waters, blasted Bush's characterization of the bill and said it gave Helms phony ammunition. "I know what racial quotas are; I have experienced them firsthand," Wilder, who is black, said in a letter to Bush.

William Bennett, the new Republican Party chairman, defended Helms' use of the quota issue and said he was ready to debate affirmative action if the Democrats bring it up. "Most Americans are troubled" by racial preference programs, he said.

Rep. Richard Gephardt, the House Democratic leader, chided Bennett for his remarks in a speech last week and charged that "ideologues on the right are following a new trail of racial resentment and recrimination" blazed by Louisiana state legislator David Duke.

Disaffected Democrats at a conservative forum predicted doom for their party unless more moderate voices are heard. "Until we give up fear and discuss these issues rationally and logically, we are going to continue to lose," said former New York Mayor Ed Koch.

Prominent Democrats say their party has a sound position but others have distorted it.

"I don't know what there is to redefine," said party chairman Ron Brown, who is black. "The Democratic Party and its chairman in particular vehemently oppose quotas. We vehemently oppose anything that could lead to reverse discrimination. The legislation that the Democratic Congress sent forward to the president was not a quota bill. It was supported by a number of conservative Republicans." But the Democrats - including Gantt himself - acknowledge that they haven't communicated well with voters, many of whom equate affirmative action with quotas. As Stone noted, "Harvey Gantt ran up and down North Carolina saying he wasn't for quotas, but nobody believed him." Working against the Democrats is a feeling among some voters that the civil rights agenda of the 1960s has been fulfilled - that affirmative action was supposed to be temporary and small-scale and has outlived its time.

But Gantt said hundreds of years of discrimination cannot be remedied in two decades. "That's not even one generation," he said.

"We need to do it, and we need to remove the stigma that we're going to discriminate against whites or we're going to promote blacks who aren't qualified. None of that is true." Many Democrats maintain the heart of the matter is economics.

They say Republicans want to divert attention from the recession, and the whole idea of affirmative action is more threatening now because jobs are scarce.

"This issue is about a shrinking economic pie and people thinking someone's going to give their slice to somebody else," said Democratic strategist Mike McCurry.

"You have to recast the debate to show the Republicans are trying to peddle fear instead of a plan to get the economy going.

And you have to have an answer for the working person who fears for his job," he added. "You have to say, 'my plan is to develop a red-hot economy so we all have jobs.'" Republican analyst Doug Bailey thinks his party, too, should look at the big picture. He said it would be "a big political mistake" to lean heavily on affirmative action to fill the void left by the end of the Cold War and the splintering of the GOP on abortion and taxes.

"It turns off a large corps of moderate voters, Northern

suburban voters who have supported the Republican party in the past," Bailey said. "They will not want to see a party intentionally choose an issue, even though it may have some merit, which divides people on racial lines." However, Stone said the theme would appeal to a group that is equally if not more important to the party - blue-collar "Reagan Democrats." And he maintained it could be pursued without the GOP appearing to be insensitive or divisive.

"You can use other issues to illustrate your desire for economic growth in the minority community," Stone said. "Go out and campaign against quotas but for enterprise zones and greater financial assistance for minority education." But the Democrats firmly believe they hold the higher ground on civil rights and can persuade voters of that. Foreshadowing the rhetoric to come, Wilder has accused Bush of failing to provide moral leadership and Brown called his veto of the civil rights bill a disgrace.

"He had an important choice to make," the party chairman said, "and he chose the politics of Jesse Helms and David Duke rather than the politics of Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln."

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