

High cost of politics silences minorities

Study finds lack of resources pushes blacks out of political hunt

By PAUL SHEPARD
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Racial minorities' influence on American politics is muted because they contribute less to political parties than whites, and have less to spend on campaigns, civil rights leaders said Friday.

"We are at the start of a decades-long civil rights movement," said John C. Bonifaz, executive director of the Boston-based National Voting Rights Institute, which sponsored the conference where the leaders gathered. "Campaign Finance as a Civil Rights Issue."

The institute, the NAACP and other civil rights organizations are seeking to portray the campaign finance issue as a new frontier in the nation's civil rights debate.

They argue that public financing of elections would help level the playing field for candidates who might be long on vision and ability but short on funding.

"We are making the argument that the lack of wealth ought not to be an obstacle to participate fully in the (political) process," said Willie Abrams, NAACP legislative counsel.

Bonifaz contended the political finance system violates the equal protection and First Amendment rights of low-income voters and candidates, who are disproportionately members of minority groups.

Because studies show minorities don't donate to candidates in the same measure as whites, their influence is reduced, Bonifaz said. Additionally, since minorities have less income and wealth than whites, the high costs of running a successful campaign disproportionately hurt their chances of running.

The institute and the NAACP have filed suit against officials in Georgia who supervise elections. It suit argues that the state's political finance system places an unfair burden on blacks and other minorities.

Black farmers file objection to settlement

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH — About 150 black farmers will object to the multimillion-dollar Agriculture Department settlement of their racial discrimination lawsuit and demand more money and guarantees, their attorney said Friday.

Marcus Jimison, managing attorney of the Durham-based Land Loss Prevention Project, said the Jan. 5 settlement of the 1997 lawsuit does not provide relief to all affected black farmers, nor does it require the USDA to admit liability or to make systemic change. The farmers also want an economic analysis conducted, he said.

"It is hard to calculate the exact extent of the damages," Jimison said. "In our pleading, one of the specific objections is that there hasn't been what we believe are sufficient explanation levels."

The farmers will send their objection Saturday to U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., where the consent decree was filed, he said.

Black farmers sued because they were denied access to government loans and subsidies. A federal judge gave preliminary approval to the deal, which covers black farmers from 1981 to 1996. Final approval is expected at a hearing on March 2.

The Land Loss Prevention Project estimates the settlement is worth anywhere from \$350 million to \$600 million, but the true cost of the USDA's discriminatory practices probably exceeds \$3 billion, said executive director Stephon J. Bowens.

"Many of the farmers objecting to the proposed consent decree recognize that USDA owes them a much greater debt than the proposed settlement provides," he said.

The consent decree would award each of between 2,000 and 8,000 farmers \$50,000 tax-free and forgive certain government debts.

Jimison said the farmers believe they also should be compensated for outstanding private debt.

"Many farmers have lots of other debt owed to private creditors incurred because couldn't get adequate money from the government to pay off private debt," he said. "So the private debt actually is a direct result of government discrimination."

The Land Loss Prevention Project said in a news release that the consent decree also omits any requirement that USDA employees who "openly and blatantly belittled, misinformed, ignored, threatened and otherwise discriminated against black farmers will be sanctioned and/or terminated."



Photo by Damon Ford

Black farmers talk with the media during a recent press conference in Greensboro.

Under the agreement, farmers with more documented evidence of their discrimination can opt to go before an independent arbitrator and seek larger damages. Farmers may also choose to opt out of the lawsuit and have their cases settled administratively within USDA.

Plaintiffs' attorney Alexan-

der Pires said earlier that he expects about 5,000 black farmers, 10 percent of the 50,000 black farmers in the country in the early 1980s, to benefit from the settlement.

A major advertising campaign was mounted on television, in magazines and in hundreds of newspapers to try to

locate more eligible farmers. The \$450,000 advertising campaign is being paid for by the Agriculture Department under the settlement agreement.

The Land Loss Prevention Project was founded in Durham in 1982 by the N.C. Association of Black Lawyers to curb land loss by black landowners.

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