

# Major political parties seek more African Americans to run for statewide offices

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WASHINGTON Competition between Democrats and Republicans to attract more black support appears to be heating up as at least four black Republicans are now running for statewide elections and Democratic leaders say they have triple that many.



In the 1960s and 1970s, it was all about a place at the table. But now, I think we need to be talking about a place on the ticket," says Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean. The former Vermont governor says he believes whites will become increasingly willing to vote for black candidates the more they relate to the issues that black candidates espouse.

"I think, both white politicians and black politicians have to understand that there's something new going on in the country, but we aren't there yet, we're far from it," says Dean, once a front-runner in the 2004 Democratic Primary for president who was elected DNC chairman February 12, 2005.

Having had little time to recruit Blacks by deadlines for Democratic primaries his first year, after 15 months, he says, he now boasts on what he perceives as a healthy list of African-American candidates. "I'm telling every chairman of every party that I want to see African-Americans and Hispanics, I want to see diversity on your statewide tickets."

Democratic activists, while remaining loyal to the party, have long criticized the party as having taken African-Americans for granted. For example, during the 2004 Democratic Primary debates, candidate Al Sharpton strongly rebuked party leaders, saying, "We need to take the Democratic Party home to our daddies and discuss marriage or a break up."

He accused the DNC, then chaired by prolific fundraiser Terry McAuliffe, of being more aggressive to win swing voters and right-wingers than African-Americans.

Meanwhile, the Republican Party has lagged grossly behind Democrats when it comes to Black support. In the 2004 presidential election, only 11 percent of black voters supported the GOP. Republican Party Chairman Ken Mehlman couldn't be reached for comment, but he acknowledged months ago that Republicans had begun running black candidates with hopes to show African-Americans that the party is serious about the black vote.

"It is our job to continue to grow our Party, by reaching out to new Republicans, independents and discerning Democrats," Mehlman declared in a speech to the annual conference of the Conservative Political Action Committee in Washington, D.C. in February. "And by continuing to bring new faces and voices into our party in the Hispanic and African American communities, by asking, 'Give us a chance, and we'll give you a choice.'"

Many Black voters see little reason to give the Republican Party a chance. On the most recent NAACP civil rights report card in February, 98 percent of Republicans in the House and Senate earned an F, compared to only 2 percent of Democrats. The Bush

administration opposed two affirmative action programs at the University of Michigan, including the university's law school program, which was ultimately upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2003. Also, Bush's appointment of two far right Supreme Court nominees, Chief Justice John Roberts to replace the late Chief Justice John Rehnquist and Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr. to replace retiring Sandra Day O'Connor, ignored the pleas of civil rights leaders who wanted more moderate justices.

Republicans have attempted to reach African-Americans through pitches about homeownership programs and urging African-Americans to join the GOP as a second political option.

Some conservative Black ministers have been won over by Republicans pitching moral issues, such as anti-abortion and opposition to same sex marriages.

In recent years, both parties have increased attempts to appeal to African-Americans, with Democrats boasting about their support of affirmative action, opposing radical right-wing judicial appointments and opposing the war in Iraq. Republicans have emphasized opposition to same sex marriages and support of homeland security and economic self-reliance.

Now, in a new attempt to reach black voters, Black Republicans are running serious races on statewide tickets. On May 2, Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell was picked by Republicans as their gubernatorial candidate over Attorney General Jim Petro 56 percent to 44 percent. In November, Blackwell will challenge U.S. Rep. Ted Strickland, who defeated former state Rep. Bryan Flannery in the Democratic primary the same day.

Blackwell played a major roll in Bush's controversial win in Ohio in the 2004 election. He was sued after an organization found that Ohio election officials had, in violation of state law, informed former felons that they could not vote. As a result of the suit, 34,000 former felons were notified that they had the right to vote.

Voters also complained that Blackwell failed to provide enough voting machines, causing some in Black and Hispanic communities to stand in lines for as long as 10 hours. Also, 95,000 votes were invalidated after being wrongly placed in machines by Hispanics who received no assistance with their language difficulties.

Still, Bush's win in Ohio—in part—attributed to a Blackwell-led referendum to prohibit same-sex marriage. According to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, approximately 16 percent of Ohio's black population (90,000 voters) supported Bush.

In February, Lynn Swann, the former wide receiver for the Pittsburgh Steelers, was chosen by Republicans as the Party's nominee for Pennsylvania's governorship. Recent polls show Gov. Ed Rendell well ahead of Swann, including a Quinnipiac University poll.

Showing him leading Swann by as much as 22 percent, with a margin of error of only 3 percent.

Also, Maryland's Republican Lt. Gov. Michael Steele is a leading candidate for the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by retiring Sen. Paul Sarbanes (D).

Republican Kay Coles James, who has served in several high-level Republican

appointments, including former director of the federal Office of Personnel Management in the Bush administration, says the fact that blacks who have already won state party primaries underscore the party's seriousness about black candidates. Still, she acknowledges that Blacks are skeptical of voting Republican.

"You don't have to give up anything," she says. "I think that has to do with sort of the stereotype that people have of parties. It has to do with stereotypes that people have of conservatives or liberals because, quite frankly, the Republican Party is as diverse in its opinions on almost any issue that you raise as the Democratic Party is," James says. "There are black Republicans who are in favor of affirmative action and who are against it. There are pro-choicers and black pro-lifers who are Republican and Democrat. I mean, you can't just make those sort of broad, sweeping statements any more. I'm not sure you ever could."

Dean points to 13 black Democrats running in statewide races, but stresses that the DNC does not involve itself with endorsing or helping candidates to win until after the primaries. Therefore, blacks, often outspent by white Democrats, are on their own in the primary campaigns.

In Georgia, Angela Moore is running for secretary of state and Mike Thurmond for commissioner of labor; in Iowa, Sal Mohammad for governor; in Illinois, Jesse White for secretary of state; in Massachusetts, Deval Patrick for governor; in Maryland, Arthur Brown and Stu Stims for lieutenant governor and Kweisi Mfume for senate; in Michigan, Mary Waters for secretary of state and Amos Williams for attorney general; in Mississippi, Erik Fleming for Senate; in New York, David Paterson for lieutenant governor; in Ohio, Ben Espy for supreme court and Barbara Sykes for auditor; in South Carolina, Cheryl Footman for secretary of state and in Tennessee, U.S. Rep. Harold Ford for the Senate.

James predicts black candidates running in both parties will empower black voters.

"I hope that the impact will be an 'Oh, shucks' moment for Democrats so that they will not take African-Americans for granted," she says. "I hope it will be a wake up call for Republicans that say, 'Oh Dear Lord, these people are here. We're really going to have to contend with them.'"

Some doubt whether black Republican seeking statewide office will translate into more Black votes for the GOP.

"It will not attract black voters," says University of Maryland political scientist Ron Walters. "Blackwell is the only one who has proven that he can attract a sizable share of the black vote."

Walters predicts that blacks may be divided if faced with a race between a Black Republican and Democrat. Currently, former NAACP President and CEO Kweisi Mfume is trailing U.S. Rep. Benjamin Cardin for the Democratic nomination to succeed retiring Sen. Paul Sarbanes. But, if Mfume wins the Sept. 12 Democratic Primary, he and Steele would go head to head.

"Mfume has the lion's share of the black vote. But I think if it came down to the two of them, I think that race might be eliminated as a factor and the election would then be fought out along the lines of issues," says Walters.

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