

Urban League won't endorse, but hope candidates 'endorse our policies'

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ST. LOUIS — From the looks of the schedule, this week's gathering of thousands for the National Urban League conference has all the trappings of a political convention.

The speakers list for the four-day conference, which begins today at America's Center, includes seven presidential contenders — four Democrats, two Republicans and one independent. Also on tap are two former presidential hopefuls — Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton — and several political strategists.

But national Urban League president Marc Morial says he doesn't want the convention to be so much about pushing politics as about promoting priorities.

As a nonprofit group, "we can't endorse any candidate," Morial said. "But every one of the candidates can endorse our objectives."

The league's primary objective, economic self-reliance and equal opportunity for all, is reflected in this year's conference theme: "You, your money and your future."

That title alone underscores the league's long-standing image for most of its 97-year history as a moderate civil rights organization with close corporate ties and a wealthier constituency than some of its counterparts. Many of the major corporations in St. Louis, including Anheuser-Busch, U.S. Bank and Enterprise Rent-A-Car, are underwriting the convention's costs.

The league's "aggressive nonpartisanship," as Morial puts it, has made its annual conference a popular destination for Republican and Democratic presidential hopefuls. The candidates know they're going to face a receptive crowd. President George W. Bush has addressed league conferences three times in the past decade.

The fact that about 10,000 people are expected in town is also a draw.

"Where else could Republicans go to address a predominately black, nonpartisan audience?" said St. Louis Urban League president James Buford, a Republican.

That backdrop is a key reason league officials are upset that none of the Republican presidential front-runners are meeting the conventioners in St. Louis. Those candidates, they say, will miss out on the league's message.

POLICY OBJECTIVES

In recent decades, the Urban League — locally and nationally — has made a point of stressing diversity. Although most of the league's services aid blacks, about a third of its members are white or non-black minorities, Morial and Buford said.

They indicated that diversity will be reflected today when league officials unveil the group's top 10 policy objectives — called "an opportunity compact."

League officials hope that all the presidential contenders will address those objectives in their appearances at the convention and on the campaign trail. All the hopefuls were given advance copies of the compact so they could address elements of it in their remarks.

Among other things, the compact is expected to call for more federal attention — and money — to improve the economic climate in urban areas where many minorities live. Along those lines, the convention will feature a daily job fair that is open to the public, with more than 100 companies interviewing prospective hires.

Another of the top 10 items will stress the importance of early childhood education, beginning at age 3, Morial said.

"It's a mistake when we disconnect education from economic outcomes," he said.

At Friday's presidential forum, the league will not dictate what the candidates talk about. Each will deliver an address of 10 to 12 minutes, followed by a question-and-answer period.

But league officials know what they don't want to hear from the candidates, Morial said.

"We want more than sound bites," he said. "We want more than slogans."

FRIDAY'S LINEUP

As of Monday, the candidates slated to take part in the forum include the three top-tier Democratic contenders — Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois and former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina — plus Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio.

The only Republicans on hand will be former Arkansas Gov. Michael Huckabee and Rep. Duncan Hunter of California. The other Republicans have said they couldn't come because of scheduling conflicts.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a possible presidential candidate who recently switched from the Republican Party to become an independent, will address league leaders at a pre-conference luncheon today.

In his address tonight kicking off the convention, Morial is expected to jab at Republicans for skipping the event. At Monday's media luncheon, he singled out three Republican contenders — Sen. John McCain of Arizona, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney.

Their decision to avoid the league gathering, said Morial, "demonstrates a lack of insight into how crucial the constituency this organization represents" will be in next year's elections.

Buford, the St. Louis Urban League president, offered a more scathing assessment.

"Obviously, they either don't have a platform to get the black vote, or they've written us off," he said.

A spokesman at the Republican National Committee in Washington disagreed, citing Bush's close ties to the league as evidence that the GOP "understands how important the black vote is."

But political science professor Larry Sabato, who heads the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, said the Republican no-shows "are simply an acknowledgement of political reality. No more, no less."

That reality, said Sabato, is that close to 90 percent of African-American voters back Democrats at the polls, and that isn't expected to change in 2008.

"Republicans have tried for decades to attract more African-American voters. They've always been unsuccessful," Sabato said. So as the GOP candidates troll for support, they've put minority voters "on the back burner" while they focus on more receptive audiences.

Most of next year's early-primary or caucus states — Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada — also have small African-American populations. That means blacks will have little voice in selecting the nominees in either party, Sabato said.

That concern seems to be on the league's mind as well. Sharpton and Jackson, along with Democratic consultant Donna Brazile, are slated to participate in a forum Thursday titled, "Will the Black Vote Be Taken for Granted in the 2008 Presidential Election?"