

Voters

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"So, you've got 35 or 40 percent of the Black community out there in the twilight zone looking for a place to land," Watts says. "There's enough blame to go around for both parties."

Now that Republicans are aggressively seeking to improve their image in the Black community, Democrats need to increase their efforts to attract Black voters, says Bill Lucy, international secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. Lucy also is a board member of the National Coalition of Black Civic Participation and founder and president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.

"The candidates ought not be afraid to campaign among Black folks," says Lucy. "Black people want the parties on the state and national levels to define themselves as to how they differ from the Republican Party, what principles they stand on and what are their uncompromising issues."

Despite incumbent President George H. Bush's high approval rating after the Persian Gulf War, Bill Clinton still won handily in 1992 by emphasizing the nation's weak economy. Over the next eight years, the economy rebounded, which was good for Democrats. But Clinton's success was short-lived. In 2002, Democrats lost control of the Senate and failed to regain control of the House.

Arthur Fletcher Jr., former assistant secretary of labor in the Nixon administration, says African-Americans are not flexing their muscles.

"This is the first time since the chains have been off of us that we should be able to put our agenda on the table, but we get inside in key positions with no agendas at all," Fletcher says. "The challenge that we have before us today is to design an agenda that is forward-looking. The [Black] Democrats have a perfect opportunity to do it because they are on all of the major committees in the House of Representatives."

Black Caucus members sit on all budgetary committees of the House, including appropriations, banking, and ways and means committees.

"Art makes a good point," says Cummings. "I do believe that with the Republican leadership, there is a shift to the states with the block grants and everything."

Money for education and infrastructure such as road

repairs are often shifted back to the states and then down to counties and cities.

However, Cummings says the CBC has had major economic successes, such as securing for minority-owned businesses 10 percent of the \$218 billion transportation budget. "We want to get beyond the Beltway, listen to people and let them know what we're trying to do," Cummings explains.

If national politics are not felt at home, the whole electoral process is weakened.

"All politics are still local even on the national level. The process starts with one man one vote," says Melanie Campbell, president and chief executive officer of the National Coalition for Black Civic Participation. "The process of how a representative democracy works is not from the top to the bottom. It's from the bottom to the top."

Terry McAuliffe, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, says he hears the rallying cry. "We can't take the vote for granted," he says.

In January, McAuliffe established a group of Black Democratic business owners to not only give financially to the party, but also to influence its policies and issues that would help reach grassroots and young voters. The group, the African-American Leadership Council (AALC), has in five months grown to more than 175 members, has raised more than \$100,000, and is already putting fire under McAuliffe.

"If we're going to win back the White House, there's got to be more energy, we need to be more focused. If we're going to win back the White House, what we're looking for is leadership," says Carole K. Crawford, a Chicago investment analyst who is a co-chair of the AALC. "We need to see our guy out there leading the charge. We've seen that over the last few weeks, but definitely need more."

The DNC, which has been criticized for not listening to Black insiders on how to reach the Black community, may change its ways with the new fund-raising group.

"When you're participating in the party in different ways, obviously you're going to have a voice," says DNC National Finance vice chair Michael Brown, the son of the late Ron Brown, a former Democratic Party chairman. "African-American money is just as impor-

tant as labor money, just as important as Latino money, just as important as gay and lesbian money, just as important as all the different factions that raise money for the party, and all of them have councils."

Among the nine Democratic presidential contenders, there are only two African-Americans, New York activist Al Sharpton and former U. S. Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun.

While their candidacies alone will not necessarily increase Black voting, bad treat-

ment of them by the Democratic Party could send a clear message that could dampen the enthusiasm of Blacks, says Dianne Pinderhughes, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"If they get abused, if it looks bad, if the Democratic Party treats them badly, it's going to discourage and defray Black turnout because people will say, 'There they go again'," says Pinderhughes, also a former president of the National Conference of Black Political

Scientists. "They've got to do a decent job at closing the campaign."

No matter what the Democrats do, Bush will be hard to defeat, says Watts.

"I don't see any reason that would keep him from winning. I think that the Democrats are all over the board right now. They have no idea who they are or what they are," Watts says. "I think this economy thing, I think President Bush will have to pay attention to that. I think we'll see him honing in on that. But, I don't see anything

discouraging at this point."

Claudine Gay, associate professor of political science at Stanford University, offers the opposite scenario:

"The economy remains weak. And if the Democrats are able to capitalize on that and really draw people's attention to the fact that Bush's first tax cut and potentially second tax cut has done nothing to revive the economy, I think they'll really be able to shift the terms of the debate, and they will stand a chance of launching a very credible challenge."

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