

Elections 2012: Where Did GOP Blacks Go?

It's a question that comes up every time you hit the homepage of the Republican National Committee's website: Where are all the Black Republicans?

Only a year after celebrating the last days of its first African-American chair, the RNC is fairly light on Black faces these days. What was once, especially during the '90s, a fairly aggressive photo-op promotional strategy strung together by a small network of die-hard Black political consultants, former elected officials and partisans, is all but dead. While it did little in the way of yielding any results comparable to Democratic counterparts, there was a sense — leading up to the election of Michael Steele as party chair — that some progress had been made in mending the often bitter relationship between African Americans and the Republican Party.

Now, as a bloody Republican primary carries on, the GOP appears smitten with the Latino vote. Presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich are bending over backwards, and breaking the bank, to connect with Latinos — looking for every conceivable angle to attract skeptical Brown voters turned off by a wave of anti-immigration sentiments. And the RNC happily trotted out a

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Charles D. Ellison

Most politically active and prominent Black Republicans — and there are only a few compared to Black Democrats — are not as vocal about their displeasure with the GOP's intense focus on the Latino vote. Most are quiet, some

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out of fear they might anger RNC bosses who are already stressed trying to keep a fractured party intact. But many are seething over what they view as a combination of betrayal and intrusion, a knife in the back from a Republican Party that was theirs from its Abraham Lincoln beginnings.

However, a source tells the Trib-

just over 11 percent of the Black vote against Democratic nominee Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass. In statewide races, Republicans tend to garner 15 percent of the Black vote on average. In 2006, then Lt. Gov. Michael Steele was able to capture more than 20 percent of the Black vote in Maryland's U.S. Senate race — but that was still very negligible for a Black candidate with extensive local roots and

partisan stripes can vote. In Florida, it was the same: only 1 percent. And, in Iowa (where there are sizeable pockets of African Americans living in such cities as Des Moines), Black votes didn't even register on a significant scale.

The problem is two-fold. The Republican Party's southern strategy in the 1960s alienated Black voters in the race for southern white and segregationist votes. This has led to the prevailing image of a political party either constantly attacking major Black policy priorities, or serving as the face of institutionalized political racism. But there is also the problem of African Americans refusing to force the two major political parties to compete for their voters. Most are fiercely loyal to the Democratic Party to the point where such affiliations are based more on personal considerations than political interests.

In contrast, Latino voters only lean 60 percent Democrat on average. In key primary states like Florida and Arizona, they represent 12 percent of the Republican primary electorate — a significant presence that warrants the attention of campaign strategists battling for every vote they can get. And a recent Cooperative Congressional Election Survey found 14 percent identified as Republican and a significant bloc, 19 percent, identified as "Independent."

It's that 19 percent that gives Republicans reason to believe they can compete for Latino votes in the general election against Barack Obama, despite recent anti-immigration rhetoric and legislation. The survey also found Latinos are more inclined to vote by race than party. With scores more Latino Republican elected officials than Black Republican



Rep. Allen West, R-Fla. speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, Friday, Feb. 10.

elected officials (there are none of the latter under the age of 40), the GOP figures it has a better chance chasing after Brown votes than Black ones.

Political strategist and former congressional candidate Princella Smith argues that because African Americans vote "lopsidedly Democrat — 80 percent to 90 percent of the time," the Republican Party fails to see any prospect of a return on the investment. "Why should I campaign to a community who will reject me as soon as I get to the front door?"

Ron Thomas, a Black Republican and former senior advisor to Rep. Michelle Bachmann's, R-Minn., failed presidential bid, agrees, quickly arguing that the GOP's enthusiastic focus on Latino voters should be something for Black Republicans and African Americans in general to worry about. "I have a bottom line philosophy: You have to have tensions on both sides of the aisle. We're the only culture where we don't make the political parties compete for our vote. Until we decide as a people that we're going to do that, we're going to stay in the same situation we're in right now."

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Director of Latino Outreach in January, eagerly announcing the move in a gritty effort to snatch Hispanic voters away from Democrats in what observers expect to be a grueling November election.

"The RNC will place staff on the ground across the country to coordinate the GOP's Hispanic effort as part of a program to make sure Barack Obama is a one-term president," said RNC Chair Reince Preibus when introducing Betinna Inclan as the point person for Republican Latino strategy. "Latinos play an integral role in our communities, and the Republican Party believes it is essential to involve Latinos at every level of our Party's efforts in 2012."

Meanwhile, the move angered a number of Black Republicans who were already feeling left out in the cold following the abrupt downfall and forced removal of Steele in 2011. Many continue to express disgust at the GOP love fest for Latinos, some out of concern that they have no other political home to turn to.

"You have no Blacks on staff at the Republican National Committee — or any of its other committees — and there are no Blacks on staff of any of the presidential campaigns," snorts longtime Black Republican strategist and marketing expert Raynard Jackson. "But maybe after a few more electoral loses you will awaken to the most loyal customer you have ever had."

une that focus could shift back to Black outreach as the Romney campaign prepares to hire a senior advisor for that exact purpose. While the source would not give details on the timing of an announcement, it was clear the embattled former Massachusetts governor is thinking ahead to the general election. "We're finalizing the details," said the source. "But, we're not completely there, yet."

The reason behind that reluctance could reflect a larger sense of caution surrounding the primaries. There are still many more states to go, with the delegate-rich "Super Tuesday" on the horizon for March 6. With the Romney campaign nervously gauging the rise of Rick Santorum while smarting from triple losses in Colorado, Missouri and Minnesota, it may be difficult to start thinking about the national scene while you're still engaged in state-by-state trench warfare. Plus, finance reports are showing a Romney campaign low on cash and near tapped on donors. Do they even have enough to go the distance?

In terms of the Black vote, it's much more complex than that. Much of it has to do with pure numbers — only 10 percent of African-American voters, on average, vote Republican during any given presidential or congressional mid-term cycle. The only Republican in the 21st century to slightly defy that trend was President Bush in 2004 when he won

who never shied away from his Blackness.

Many Republican strategists and candidates alike are quick to attribute those dismal ratings to Black dismissiveness. "It's hard. We get called 'racists,' but we're expected to go out and do outreach with these people," complains one veteran white GOP campaign expert who wanted to speak off the record. Visibly angered by the question, the senior aide to numerous Republican campaigns accused Black voters of "setting unfair expectations."

Hence, Republican insiders point to the math in recent primaries. For example, only 2 percent of Black voters in South Carolina are registered Republicans. To make it worse, only 1 percent of South Carolina primary voters in January were Black — and that was in an "open primary" where voters of all

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