

4 GOP candidates' decision to skip black forum seen hurting party in '08

By Michael Kranish

GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON — The decision by four top Republican presidential candidates to skip a long-planned forum next week on African-American issues has renewed a debate over whether some GOP contenders are writing off many black voters, with some analysts suggesting the move could hurt the party's chances in the 2008 general election.

The four candidates leading in most national polls — Rudy Giuliani, John McCain, Mitt Romney, and Fred Thompson — have said they have fund-raising or other scheduling conflicts and will not attend the nationally televised forum in Baltimore on Sept. 27. But even some leading Republicans questioned whether the candidates are interested in addressing issues of special concern to African-Americans.

"I think it is a terrible mistake," former House speaker Newt Gingrich said in a telephone interview yesterday. "I did everything I could to convince them it was the right thing to do, [but] we are in this cycle where Republicans don't talk to minority groups," he said. Yet Gingrich added Republicans cannot afford to ignore black voters during the primaries because the GOP will need their support if they hope to win the general election.

A Romney spokesman, Eric

Fehrnstrom, said Romney will be in California at the time of the event, raising funds and attending political activities. The three other candidates who declined to attend have given similar explanations.

But a radio talk show host, Tavis Smiley, who is moderating the debate at historically black Morgan State University for the Public Broadcasting System, said in a telephone interview he found it troubling the candidates cited scheduling conflicts as the reason for not attending. He noted the date for the forum was arranged in consultation with GOP officials and announced in February.

"No person, black, white, or brown, Democrat or Republican, male or female, no person should be elected president in 2008 without speaking to communities of color," Smiley said.

Univision, a Spanish-language media company, canceled a GOP debate focused on Hispanic issues when only McCain had agreed to appear. All the Democratic candidates attended a forum on black issues moderated by Smiley in June, and all but one attended a debate sponsored by Univision.

Smiley said five candidates have agreed to attend next week's debate: former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, US Senator Sam Brownback, and US Representatives Ron Paul, Tom Tancredo, and Duncan Hunter. Smiley said he

plans to have four empty podiums onstage, highlighting the leading candidates' absence. Huckabee hopes to use the forum to broaden his appeal. "He certainly feels the issues are important to the African-American community and are issues he always has high on his list of priorities," spokeswoman Alice Stewart said.

The Republican Party has made major efforts to court the black vote. President Bush received an estimated 9 percent of the black vote in 2000 and 11 percent in 2004; exit polls in Ohio put Bush's black vote in 2004 at 16 percent, which some analysts said won him the state and reelection. But when the Republican Party ran several high-profile black candidates in 2006, Michael Steele lost his race for US senator in Maryland, Lynn Swann lost his bid for governor in Pennsylvania, and Kenneth Blackwell lost his campaign for governor in Ohio.

Max Hilaire, chairman of political science at Morgan State University, said that black voters may see the decision by the four candidates not to attend the forum as a snub. "While the overwhelming majority of blacks don't support the Republican Party, that is not a reason not to show up," Hilaire said, noting that a Republican candidate may need 10 percent or more of the black vote to win the general election.

