



Black Democrats on Hill Set to Meet

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By The NorthStar News Staff

Black Caucus Convenes Conference This Week

The Black members of Congress are preparing to meet this week to explore a number of issues important to the nation's Black community. The 33rd annual Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) Legislative Conference (for conference information see [CBC Foundation](#)) is set to convene this week at the Washington Convention Center. Chairing the annual gathering is Rep. Juanita Millender-McDonald of California. The conference kicks off on September 24 and runs through September 27, culminating in a black-tie awards dinner. The theme for this year's event is Collective Leadership-Challenging A Bold New World. Some 30,000 people are expected to be in attendance.

The Congressional Black Caucus is comprised of the 39 Black members of the House of Representatives who collectively represent some 25 million constituents, many of them non-Black. Though open in theory to legislators from both major political parties, the Caucus has traditionally been an organization of Democratic officeholders, as the few Black Republicans who have served in Congress chose not to become affiliated with the group. As such, the Caucus serves as an important voice in the party that most Blacks align with as voters. Given its numbers, and the number of voters its members represent, the CBC is an important voting bloc for Democrats on the floor of the House, giving Black lawmakers significant leverage in party politics.

This year's Caucus event is being held against the backdrop of the Iraq conflict and a stalled economy, with federal dollars being diverted to maintain the nation's military operations in the Persian Gulf Region and Black unemployment in double-digits. Public opinion polls have consistently revealed strong Black opposition to the Bush administration's foreign policy and displeasure over the pace of the economic recovery. The war and the faltering economy are certain to be the focus of much discussion during the four-day event. The conference also has added significance as it precedes a presidential election year and is sure to attract the Democratic candidates seeking the White House in 2004. With Black votes in 2004 key to Democratic fortunes in the South, a region that has leaned Republican since 1968, and urban areas, the Caucus weekend may be a good barometer on the degree to which the Democratic Party's interests are aligned with Black voters.

Coming two weeks after the Caucus sponsored presidential debate at Morgan State University the CBC conference maintains the spotlight on Black Democrats on Capitol Hill. Under the leadership of Rep. Elijah Cummings of Maryland, the Caucus has significantly increased its profile in recent months. The debate at Morgan State, co-sponsored by the Fox News Channel, had the highest ratings for programs in its time slot that evening. It came on the heels of the Caucus' launching a weekly radio address on the American Urban Radio Network's (AURN) 450 affiliate stations across the nation. The "CBC Message to America" radio commentaries provide Caucus members, and invited guests, to speak directly to the 25 millions listeners tuned into AURN stations.

Though the CBC weekend has gained a reputation for its social activities and festive atmosphere, there will be a series of panel discussions or "Issues Forums" and "Braintrusts" focused on a variety of important public policy issues. These sessions begin on Wednesday when the conference opens and continues through Friday. Topics include the Administration of Justice, Defense, International, Voting Rights, and Science/Technology. Each session is chaired by one of the CBC members and panelists include some of the nation's most recognized authorities on public policy. All of the sessions are open to conference registrants and will be held in the Washington Convention Center, a new facility that replaces the District of Columbia's old convention center complex.

The CBC Legislative Conference remains the only conference where Blacks from across the nation, and internationally, can engage federal lawmakers on key issues. It is also an opportunity for Blacks from across a number of professional fields to network and engage in a dialogue concerning a variety of important subjects. The conference annually attracts academicians, social scientists, and policy analysts engaged in research aimed at improving conditions for Blacks. Conference registrants have the opportunity to hear the findings of the most current social science research and obtain valuable information that

could aid individuals in work they are engaged in at home in their communities.

An important indicator of the impact of the CBC will be whether the field of Democratic candidates begins to incorporate the concerns of the Caucus in their campaign agendas. Just as significant will be the adoption of the CBC's priorities into the party's platform for 2004. Though party platforms have largely become a ceremonial gesture, given the dominance of the eventual candidate, it still represents a public articulation of those issues that the party professes a commitment. It sends a signal to key constituencies that their concerns are a priority for the party and will be addressed accordingly. Certainly, issues surrounding job generation and economic opportunity, health care, public education, and foreign relations with Africa will be on the CBC's radar as it attempts to influence the party's nominee for president.