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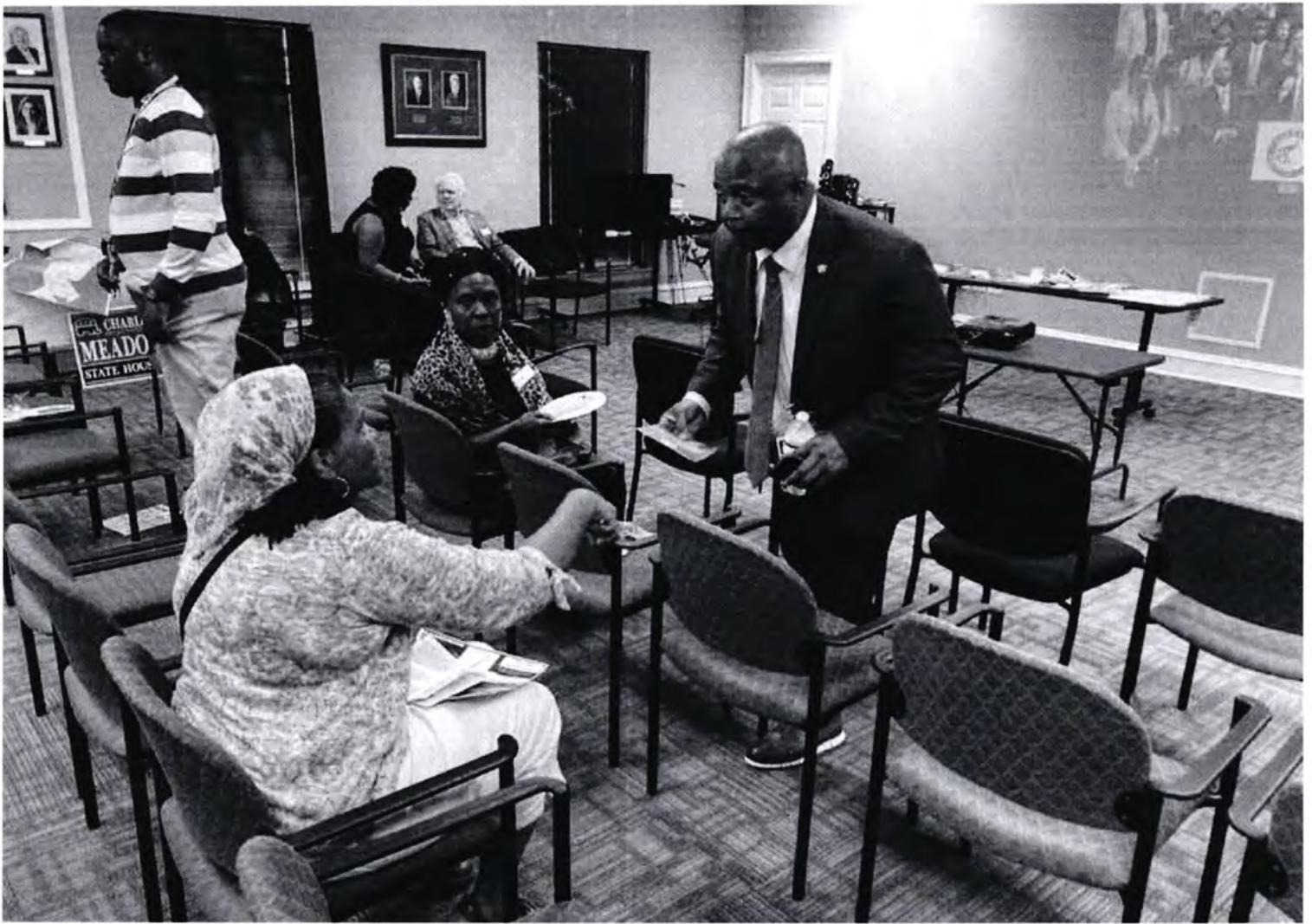
NEWS

Alabama GOP's minority outreach message: 'OK to have dark skin' and be Republican

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Rep. Kenneth Paschal, R-Pelham, speaks to a woman who attended the Alabama Republican Party's outreach coalition event Thursday night in Montgomery. (Mike Cason/mcason@al.com)



By **Mike Cason** | mcason@al.com

The Alabama Republican Party is making a renewed effort to recruit Black voters and other minorities who lean conservative but are mostly on the sidelines when it comes to politics.

Leading the effort is state Rep. Kenneth Paschal of Pelham, who last year became the first Black Republican elected to the Legislature since Reconstruction when he won a Shelby County seat.

Paschal, a retired U.S. Army sergeant, said he wants people to set aside stereotypes and reflect on what matters to them and their families.

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"Who you are, what you stand for, what you believe in. And then you see which party is more likely to get you where you want to go. And I think it's the Republican party," Paschal said.

"I want to emphasize it's OK to have dark skin and acknowledge that you're a Republican, you're a conservative, you have conservative values," Paschal said.

Paschal, 55, is director of the ALGOP Outreach Coalition, a five-member group spearheading an initiative announced last year. In Montgomery on Thursday night, the Coalition hosted the first of what it plans to be a series of meet-and-greet events to invite conservative or independent minorities and encourage them to become active in the party. The coalition used voting records to help develop its invitation list.

Belinda Thomas, co-director of the ALGOP Outreach Coalition, said the goal is to let people know their votes are appreciated but that there is more they can do. Thomas was part of a "strike force" of Alabama Republicans who campaigned for President Trump in Sarasota, Fla., two years ago, an effort that helped Trump win the swing state.

"We need active members getting out here, getting engaged, working," said Thomas, the only Black member of the Newton Town Council in Dale County.



Newton Town Councilwoman Belinda Thomas speaks at Thursday night's Alabama Republican Party minority outreach event in Montgomery. (Mike Cason/mcason@al.com)

The Republican Party has been dominant in Alabama for more than a decade and holds every statewide office and three-fourths of the seats in the Legislature. All the party's statewide office-holders are white and Paschal is the only African American among more than 100 representatives and senators.

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Paschal acknowledges the significance of being Alabama's first Black GOP lawmaker in more than a century. But he puts more emphasis on a belief that his election in a majority white district was an example of a fulfillment of what Martin Luther King Jr., said in his "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, that people be judged on their character and not their skin color.

"I want to make sure every county has the opportunity to make sure his dream comes true where people start getting more involved, not because of your color, but because of what you believe in, your values," Paschal said. "Faith. Family. Safe communities. Our freedoms. School choice."

Paschal said the party has not done enough to invite Black people and other minorities, including people with Hispanic and Asian backgrounds.

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"I think our efforts haven't been what it should be," Paschal said.

"If you go to any Republican group or county meeting, we say we're open to all but does it look like we're open to all?" Paschal said. "The answer is no. So my efforts are to make sure people know we are open to all people of different backgrounds. We want to quantify that by doing a better job on our outreach program. And I think of all people in the state of Alabama, I'm the best person that can tell people the Republican Party is readily open to all people. I have been embraced by the entire party everywhere I go."

Th Outreach Coalition's mission statement includes a short-term goal, to reach out to diverse voters who vote conservatively and recognize their value. And it includes long-term goals, to seek out individuals with conservative values who have not yet voted Republican and to recruit a diverse group of candidates.

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Cedric Coley of Montgomery, the central Alabama regional director for the Outreach Coalition, said the party needs to hear from a greater variety of voices.

"We want to know how we can make the party more welcoming to them, and also if there is something such as an idea or suggestion, we want to make sure we're hearing that as well," Coley said.

For example, Coley said the Republican Party's support for closing Alabama primaries and requiring party registration might not be popular with some minority voters the party is hoping to recruit.

"A lot of these individuals are independent and they lean Republican," Coley said. "So are they comfortable with the fact that some members of the Republican Party want to close the primaries? And there's potential legislation coming next year about that. So we want to know how they feel about that."

Coley, who is Black, said the Outreach Coalition hopes to show minority voters the practical benefits of working with like-minded people on political goals.

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"The main mission of tonight is to show individuals that are active with the party and individuals who aren't active but they lean conservative that we're not walking this alone," Coley said. "If we stand shoulder-to-shoulder together, there's some issues that we can get solved."

Coley, 32, said his move toward the GOP started about 2010 during the debate over the merits of the Affordable Care Act, the signature legislation of President Obama. Coley said he did not support the law, including the requirement that everyone buy health insurance or face a tax penalty.

"That got me involved and for the past 12 years I've been involved with the Republican Party," Coley said.

"I actually started in politics as an independent," he said. "And I'm leaning and now more so in the Republican Party because they're the biggest network of conservatives. And that's what this is about."



Cedric Coley of Montgomery speaks at the ALGOP Outreach Coalition event Thursday night in Montgomery. (Mike Cason/mcason@al.com)

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Richard Fording, a political science professor at the University of Alabama, said the Republican Party's goal of attracting more engaged Black citizens can be beneficial for the state. But he does not think an outreach initiative can significantly increase support from Black voters unless the party changes some of its stances on policy.

"I think it's a good thing that the Alabama Republican Party wants to be more inclusive and reach out to African American voters," Fording said. "I think that's a healthy thing. I think that's what both parties should be trying to do especially when we're in a two-party system.

"But I don't know what the strategy is to do that because they've got a lot to overcome when it comes to the policy agenda that's been at the forefront of the Alabama Republican Party lately."

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Examples include the law passed in 2017 that was intended to preserve Confederate monuments on taxpayer-owned property, a law that passed over opposition from the nearly all-Black Democratic caucus a few years ago. This year, Alabama Republican officials joined a national movement to denounce critical race theory, which some see as an effort to deny the consequences of systemic racism. And the Republican-led Legislature passed a Congressional redistricting plan last year that kept six of Alabama's seven U.S. House districts majority white, declining to consider plans that would have given African-Americans a chance to elect a second Black Congressional member. A three-judge federal court temporarily blocked the use of the plan, finding that it probably violated the Voting Rights Act because "Black voters have less opportunity than other Alabamians to elect candidates of their choice to Congress." The case is set for arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court in October.

"I just don't know how the Republican party in Alabama can be doing all these things and position themselves as the friend of African Americans," Fording said. "I don't know how that works."

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Fording said exit polling showed 89 percent of Alabama Black voters supported Joe Biden in the 2020 election. Nationally, he said about the same percentage of Black voters supported Biden and Hillary Clinton four years earlier. That loyalty to the Democratic Party has remained stable for decades, Fording said. He said polling that measures party identification gives no evidence that Black voters are moving away from the Democratic Party in Alabama.

"I would almost go as far to say that this is never going to change in our lifetimes," Fording said.

Fording said the preeminence of Donald Trump and the Make America Great Again Movement in the Republican Party makes the GOP's outreach to minority voters more difficult. Fording's book, "Hard White: The Mainstreaming of Racism in American Politics," co-authored with Sanford F. Schram, says Trump stoked white fear and resentment of minorities, immigrants, Muslims and others characterized as outsiders on his way to winning the White House, going back to Trump's advocacy for the birther movement that sought to discredit Obama with false claims that he was born outside the United States.

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Jess Brown, a retired political science professor from Athens State University, said Black voters moved to the Democratic Party because of the economic benefits of the New Deal programs started in the 1930s and the party's support for African American rights in the 1960s with legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

Brown said the Republican Party's outreach effort, on the surface, appears to be an effort that could marginally improve the party's image with Black voters. But Brown believes it would take meaningful action by the Alabama Legislature, controlled by a Republican supermajority, to convince a sizeable portion of Black voters that the GOP is their political home.

"If the Republican Party wants something to pass the Alabama Legislature, it will pass," Brown said. "And I don't think the Republican Party is going to be truly viewed as inclusive unless it starts to enact policies that have an appeal to a pretty wide swath of African American voters. Not necessarily a majority but a respectable share. That's the litmus test."

Brown said the minority outreach effort could be reassuring to a segment of white Republican voters concerned that the GOP can be characterized as a lily white party. Brown said it's important for the party to expand its reach in the long term because of the trend that whites are a declining proportion of the population.

"If you're thinking about the future as a party leader, you don't worry about the demographics of the nursing home," Brown said. "You look at the demographics of the sixth grade. Go into elementary schools across America and look at the demographics of the people sitting there."

"This problem for the Republican Party is going to manifest itself in other states a lot quicker than in Alabama. But even in Alabama, Republicans need to be concerned about the demographic changes that are coming down the pipeline."

Thomas, the Newton Town Councilwoman who campaigned for President Trump, said she grew up in a Democratic family but has identified more with the positions of Republicans for as long as she can remember.

"Because I believe in the Constitution. I believe in my country. And I believe in my conservative values," Thomas said.

Paschal said the Democratic Party needs to consider its lack of diversity, too. Alabama has only one white Democrat in the state Senate and one in the state House of Representatives.

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"So both parties need to do a better job and I think our state would benefit from that," Paschal said. "My point being, you want to have diversity at the table. That way you get different input, different views."

Paschal said that by getting more Black people and other minorities involved in local Republican organizations and in leadership positions there, the party can strengthen its pitch to minority voters who share similar beliefs and attitudes but have not acted on that by voting Republican.

"We say we're open to all," Paschal said. "The short-term goal is to quantify that by reaching every county in our state just like we're doing tonight. And then when we start looking like we're open to all, in the long term I think we're better able to go into the different communities that might not be voting their values and then explain to them this is why I believe in the Republican Party."

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