

NAACP DECRIES ATTEMPT TO DISCOURAGE S.C. BLACK VOTE

**By Jordan Green
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Rev. Joe Darby, the pastor of Morris Brown AME Church in Charleston, S.C., might have been more than a little surprised by the letter he received on Friday. Drafted on what appeared to be NAACP letterhead, it informed him he could face arrest when he votes Tuesday if he's behind on child support payments, has any unpaid traffic tickets, or has bad credit.

Not only was the information blatantly false, but Darby was in a position to know that the South Carolina NAACP wouldn't misinform black voters about fake restrictions of their voting rights. After all, he's the vice president of the state NAACP.

"I hope they weren't just sending letters to members of the NAACP," he said. "I certainly don't think they meant to send one to the vice president. It was pretty stupid."

Darby said he considers the letter an example of old-fashioned minority voter intimidation, a disinformation tactic that is insulting but not terribly intimidating in 2004.

"There's a racist assumption that black folks will be intimidated because 'they must be in trouble with the law,' or 'they must be in financial trouble,'" he said. "I think they're minimally effective. There has been a massive effort since the Florida debacle to inform people about what's required to vote, and to watch out for bogus stuff."

The state NAACP has gotten at least eight complaints from black voters in Charleston, Sumter and York counties, who say they received the letter over the past weekend, Director Dwight James said. Given that the letter to Darby included the last four digits of his Zip code, indicating his voting precinct, James said he assumes the addresses were taken from a voters list on file at the State Elections Commission in Columbia.

It's unclear why the disinformation campaign has targeted the three counties. Charleston County is about a third African American, with 32,864 black residents mainly concentrated in the city core along Interstate 26 between the Cooper River and the Ashley River. Sumter County has a 46.7 percent black population clustered on the south side of the county seat and in the northeastern hamlets of Rembert and Dalzell. About a fifth of York County's population is black, with many residing in the towns of Rock Hill and York.

In contrast, 55,736 African Americans live in Orangeburg County, where the bogus letters have

so far not been reported to the NAACP. Blacks make up 60.9 percent of the county's population.

Darby said the letter he received had no return address, but under the letterhead listed the address for Hyatt Park in Columbia, where the NAACP recently held a get-out-the-vote rally, under the organization's misappropriated logo.

The beginning of the letter is innocuous enough. It refers to registration efforts by "theNAACPVoteStartProgram" and mentions a voter's guide. The only problem is the NAACP doesn't have a program called "Vote-Start." Then, the letter lists three eligibility requirements: voters must be 18 years old, must be a U.S. citizen, and must be a resident of South Carolina. That's all true.

But the next paragraph is categorically false.

"The following persons may not register or vote and will be subject to arrest," it states. "Persons with outstanding traffic violations, including moving violations and parking citations above \$50.00; Persons who have not submitted credit reports dated one week prior to election day; [and] Persons adjudged to be negligent in paying child support."

The letter also states that prospective voters must, upon request, provide "two pieces of Photo ID and Social Security Card; Voter Registration Card; [and] Handwriting sample for authentication purposes" at the polls.

South Carolina election law requires voters to provide only one of three types of identification: a voter registration card, a driver's license, or another form of picture ID issued by the state, Elections Commission spokesman Gary Baum said. Under no circumstances should voters be required to provide a handwriting sample at the polls.

Several other crude disinformation campaigns designed to keep likely Democratic voters away from the polls have also cropped up around the country, mostly in closely-contested swing states.

- In Madison, Wisc., the College Republicans and a Republican congressional candidate Dave Magnum took responsibility for distributing a flier erroneously stating that students at the University of Wisconsin could vote at any of five polling locations, according to a Nov. 1 report in The Capital Times;

- In Berkeley County, W. Va., Democratic voters in the Eastern Panhandle received calls telling them they were not registered to vote. The County Clerk's office traced the calls back to the headquarters of the Eastern Pandhandle Republican Party, local NBC News affiliate Channel 25 reported on Oct. 8;

- In Painesville, Ohio, newly registered voters signed up by the Kerry campaign and the NAACP received a letter telling them their registrations were illegal and they would not be able to vote, NBC affiliate WKYC Channel 3 reported on Oct. 28; and

- In Pittsburgh, shoppers at Ross Park Mall were given bogus letters written on Allegheny

County stationary stating that Republicans should vote on Nov. 2 and Democrats should vote on Nov. 3, according to an Oct. 28 report in the Pittsburgh Tribune Review.

Darby said that while the South Carolina NAACP is not greatly alarmed by the fraudulent letter, the state organization is urging its 40 branch chapters to inform their members so they won't be deterred from going to the polls by the misinformation.

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, based in Washington, D.C., is treating the disinformation campaign with deadly seriousness. The campaign's website notes that the state is in the grip of a bruising fight between Republican Congressman Jim DeMint and State Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum for the U.S. Senate seat left open by Fritz Hollings' retirement. Republican vote suppression campaigns have traditionally targeted minority voting blocs in tight races.

A Halloween day news release by the DSCC warns that the letter is "aimed at scaring minorities from voting," adding: "This is the most blatant, unseemly voter intimidation tactic we've seen so far."

Not surprisingly, no one has stepped forward to take responsibility for the letter.

"If you were looking for someone who might be a likely suspect, you would look to people who have a history of voter suppression," state NAACP Director James said. "You've got extremist groups such as neo-Nazis and the Council of Conservative Citizens. The Ku Klux Klan is still around in South Carolina."

But Kevin Gray, director of the American Civil Liberties Union of South Carolina and a coordinator for a statewide media campaign to get young minorities to vote called "You've Got a Stake, You've Got a Say," sees a more mainstream culprit. He said he wouldn't be surprised if the Republican Party was behind the letter, but ironically the disinformation campaign may end up helping the Democrats more.

"There's no question Republicans will try to suppress the black vote," he said. "But there's also no question Democrats will use that to get black people to the polls."

Given the potential backlash against such crude tactics, it's hard to tell which party benefits more from voter intimidation tricks such as the fraudulent NAACP letter, Gray suggested.

"It drives black turnout up," he added. "You might have some Democratic operatives floating those letters."

Gray, who has ties with both the Democratic and Green parties, said even if Republicans and their allies are behind the disinformation campaign, the complaints of vote suppression by Democratic partisans ring hollow.

"It appears to be their only get-out-the-vote mechanism," he said. "Black people are opposed to the war. Black folks are wanting to deal with the drug war, and the number of young men who

are being incarcerated because of it. You haven't heard any agenda from the Democrats that addresses those issues. Instead, we're talking about voter suppression."

Reached by phone on Monday, South Carolina Republican Party Director Luke Byars put forth a blame-the-purported victim theory.

"We have no knowledge of it," he said. "The only one that received that letter was Joe Darby. It sounds like it was something that was manufactured by the NAACP or the Democratic Party to try to help get their vote out."

Byars' remarks are unfortunate, the NAACP's James said.

"He probably doesn't know much about the NAACP and its history in terms of making sure the opportunity to cast a ballot is ensured," he said. "It would be totally out of character for the NAACP to engage in such activities. We've spent many years fighting against intimidation by both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party."

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