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Poverty activists see political opportunity

Spiritual leaders encourage young to vote for those who favor social justice

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COLUMBUS, Ohio

Left-leaning Christian and social activists see opportunity in an unconventional presidential race and a spiraling national economy: pushing poverty as an election issue.

At a time when more than 37 million Americans are in poverty, including many who are newly poor and paying keen attention, spiritual leaders are encouraging the young to vote and urging voters to select candidates who will fight poverty.

"I feel more momentum, energy and focus on poverty than I have in churches in three decades or more," said Jim Wallis, chief executive officer of Sojourners social justice ministries in Washington.

"Partly, it's a new generation. Baby boomers are becoming church leaders and speaking to a new generation that wants their lives to make a difference. It's a new altar call, if you will," he said.

In Orlando, Fla., participants in Sojourners' Vote Out Poverty initiative have coalesced around a controversial city law that prohibited feeding the homeless in a city park. Opponents got the law overturned in court.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson recently visited battleground Ohio to push superintendents in its eight largest school districts to register high school seniors to vote. He has repeated the message -- central to his Rainbow/PUSH Coalition -- in Atlanta, Detroit, Baltimore and New York.

Jackson, whose efforts are separate from Vote Out Poverty, said nine in 10

Cleveland public school students are poor.

"Children go to school in those great numbers," he said. "Many of them do not have reading glasses. Many of them don't have hearing support or dental care. So we've got unemployed parents because of the lack of health care, often second-class schools because of the funding scheme, and then little hope on the back side."

ONE.org, a nonpartisan coalition of more than 100 advocacy and humanitarian organizations, including some churches, has taken up the same cause, operating a grass-roots movement and TV ads stretching across all 50 states.

Sojourners has collected 20,000 Vote Out Poverty pledges from voters to pick candidates who will fight poverty, and thousands more from candidates who have committed to cutting poverty in half by 2019. Sunday sermons on poverty are being delivered around the country.

The movement has been embraced by more than 100 churches in a dozen states, but Wallis said political battleground states are crucial to its success.

"In election times, it's difficult because of all the competition -- like right now we're talking about the collapse of the financial markets, last election it was the threat of terrorism. Poverty gets pushed aside," Wallis said.

As excited as activists are, however, success is not assured, said David Brady, an associate professor of sociology at Duke University. He said the last time poverty played a role in national politics was when then-President Clinton was battling with Congress over welfare reform in 1996.

He said there is little evidence candidates care.

"I've not heard anything in the vice presidential and presidential debates, in stump speeches, in talking points, in the news coverage," he said. "There's this sense that everyone is middle class, and let's dare not talk about poor people."

Yet anti-poverty activists are trying to get the attention of politicians during this election, the first in decades without an incumbent president or vice president running. The effort is political, they say, but it is not partisan.

The cause has resonated across party lines and denominations, said Elaine Clements, deacon of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in New Orleans. More liberal Episcopalians and Methodists are working alongside more conservative evangelicals and Baptists in a manner many say they have not seen this generation.

She said that every Wal-Mart patron she has approached in the economically stricken Tchoupitoulas neighborhood has readily signed a pledge to pick local, state and federal candidates this year with poverty foremost in mind.

Many Christians viewed the city's treatment after Hurricane Katrina as added evidence that the poor's needs were being overlooked, said Lisa Sharon Harper, of New York Faith & Justice.

"War and violence across the globe, the lack of compassion toward the poor during their time of most need in Katrina, and the collapse of an economic structure where Wall Street was made rich on the backs of the poor," Harper said. "There's an open window that nobody really made. It's just time."
