Democrats gear up for early voting, an edge they exploited in 2008

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An hour before sunrise Saturday, a group of clergy will gather outside the Palm Beach County Supervisor of Elections headquarters, bless the polls and lead the faithful in eight days of early voting — a seemingly benign practice that has become a righteous exercise for Democrats.

While election experts say Democrats’ strong early voting in 2008 could have been an aberration, driven by the enthusiasm raised by Hillary Clinton’s primary candidacy and then the nation’s first black presidential candidate, those organizing early voting efforts this year believe Democrats will again swarm to the polls before election day.

In the November 2008 election, Democrats cast 61.2 percent of the county’s 144,251 early ballots, while Republicans made up 18.7 percent of the early voters. The remaining votes were cast by voters with no or minor party affiliation.

“The key is on-the-ground organization,” said Kevin Wagner, an attorney and professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University. “Democrats have always been better at on-the-ground organization. They’ve proven they know how to handle that.”

Among the best organized early voting efforts are by black churches, which launched a Souls to the Polls campaign nationwide to get black voters — overwhelmingly Democrats — to cast their ballots this weekend. Rev. Al Sharpton, host of MSNBC’s Politics Nation, will appear at nine churches, rallies and community centers this weekend to kick-off Souls to the Polls campaigns. In other communities, leaders from 44 congregations in Kissimmee, Tampa, Gainesville and Pensacola expect to take more the 2,000 voters — mostly black and Hispanic — to the polls this weekend.

Palm Beach County black churches from Belle Glade to West Palm Beach expect to take hundreds of voters to the polls this weekend.

“The teaching is that you cannot be truly Christian and not be involved with politics and what’s going on in society,” said Rev. Nathaniel Robinson, pastor at St. Paul AME Church in Boynton Beach. “We need to get the right people in the right places.”
Recent bible study classes have focused on Jesus in politics, Robinson said. While he does not endorse any candidate, Robinson encourages his congregation “to consider candidates that would do things Jesus would do, like feeding the poor.” Robinson has partnered with other black churches in the community to organize three early voting events.

At 9 a.m. Saturday, buses will take voters from the church’s parking lot to the polls in Delray Beach. At 1:30 p.m. Sunday, members of several churches will meet at the Publix on Woolbright Road and Federal Highway and head to the polls in vans. On Nov. 3 — the final day of early voting — early-voting groups will have a picnic in the church parking lot, Robinson said.

There are 14 early voting polling sites compared to 11 in 2008. Susan Bucher, Palm Beach County Supervisor of Elections, said operating each polling site costs $50,000. Although there are more polling places, there is none in Boynton Beach. During a recent conference call with pastors, Bucher — who was not supervisor in 2008 — explained that there were parking and crowding problems at the two Boynton Beach early voting sites that year.

Early voting in Florida began in 2004 and was an instant hit with voters, who waited three to four hours to cast early ballots. The 12- to 14-day early voting period throughout the state gave voters who could not vote on weekdays two weekends to cast their ballots. Early voting became popular with black voters and in the 2008 presidential election, more than half of those who voted did so during early voting. Black churches throughout the country organized Souls to the Polls campaigns to encourage their members to vote on the final Sunday of early voting.

In 2011, Florida lawmakers enacted changes to voting laws that cut the number of early voting days from 14 to eight — meaning early voting would be available on only one Sunday. Opponents claimed the GOP-controlled legislature pushed the new law because shortening the early voting period would likely reduce Democratic turnout. Prohibiting voting on the last Sunday before the election — Souls to the Polls Sunday — could also lower black voter turnout.

A lawsuit ensued and on Sept. 25 a federal judge upheld the changes. Black pastors responded by moving Souls to the Polls Sunday to the second Sunday before election day. At Hurst Chapel AME in Riviera Beach, Rev. Hudson Williamson advertised the new Souls to the Polls date in the weekly bulletin.

The church has always been active in social and political issues because “whatever decision is made is going to affect the church and community,” Williamson said. The church also has a social action committee that kept members notified of the recent changes to early voting.

“It’s working,” Williamson said of the church’s effort to get out the vote — early.

Those most likely to vote early are Democratic women. In the 2008 presidential race, female Democrats cast one-third of all early ballots.

Joan Waitkevicz, president of the Democratic Women of Palm Beach County, said many of the campaign volunteers are women, who vote early so they have more time to volunteer on or before election day. Meredith Ockman, president of the Palm Beach County National
Organization for Women, said women “tend to plan ahead and do our homework” and vote early “because they may not be able to get there on Election Day.”

As for local Republicans, Sid Dinerstein, county GOP chairman, said he intends to vote early but there have been no efforts made by the party to encourage or organize early voting.

“We don’t do what the other guys do, because we’re Republicans and we take responsibility for ourselves,” Dinerstein said, adding that Republicans tend to do more absentee than early voting. “I don’t care how we get those votes, we just want to get them.”